

Tackling obesity - watch out for undue corporate influence



Scientific evidence proves that breastfeeding provides a potentially ideal window of opportunity for obesity prevention, and may help in the development of taste receptors and appetite control.

The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considered that there are only two potential, cost-effective interventions that can be put into place immediately to deal with the childhood obesity epidemic: **decreased television viewing** and **breastfeeding promotion**.

“Artificially fed infants consume 30,000 more calories than breastfed infants by 8 months of age” (equivalent to 120 Mars bars - 4 a week). *Student Study Guide for Breastfeeding and Human Lactation* KG Auerbach, J Riordan - 1993

All too often the education process is entrusted to people who appear to have no understanding of industry and the path of progress...The provision of education is a market opportunity and should be treated as such”

European Round Table of Industrialists, 1988

As the pressure is mounting on junk food companies to stop advertising to children, some are attempting to reestablish themselves as health food and ‘nutrition education’ companies - arguing that a ban on advertising is not necessary. At the same time some governments are encouraging business sponsorship of schools. But there are many risks. Companies that have an interest in selling products to children (or parents) have a dual motive for sponsoring educational materials. Any investment by them must show a return, either in the short or the long term. Their materials present an even more complex problem than crude brand promotions because they blur the boundaries between advertising, marketing and education. They can also subtly distort the curriculum in favour of business interests while allowing companies to gain the trust of parents, children and teachers. Sponsorship is an effective way to divert attention from irresponsible marketing. It can also create pressures on teachers, effectively preventing them from expressing concerns or encouraging open debate about the activities of sponsors. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* calls on Governments to protect children from exploitation and the World Health Assembly Resolutions on *Infant Feeding* and *Diet and Physical Activity* contain safeguards against conflicts of interest. These Conventions

and Resolutions should be used to ensure that health and education facilities are commercial free environments, to prevent the baby food industry from giving parent craft classes and junk food companies from providing core educational materials.

Seven of the 15 least healthy breakfast cereals in the Consumers Association’s report, *Cereal offenders* (March 04) were Nestlé products. Below are some examples of how similar products are promoted, along with chocolate and sugary drinks, as the healthy option.



- **Box Tops schemes in the UK:** Nestlé offers schools cash in exchange for cereal box tops brought in by children.

- In 2002 the makers of *Walkers* crisps filmed a TV advert in a classroom in Fossdene Primary School in East London. The whole school had a day off and the school received about £2,000 and book tokens in return.

- **Pushing chocolate instead of sandwiches in Russia:** Left: Nestlé’s ‘*Programme about Correct Nutrition - working notebook for school children*’ is used in thousands of schools in Russia. Page 55 shows a mother telling her child that eating chocolate rather than a sandwich before an exam will help her manage the difficult exercises. Does this convey the message that the more chocolate you eat the cleverer you will be?

Reformulations, novel foods: how healthy or safe are they?

Some companies are now reformulating products, replacing the salt, sugar and fat with artificial ingredients and additives which maintain the intense sweet taste. The safety and nutritional value of these ingredients and novel processes are controversial. Surely children have a right to a truly objective view?

- **Aspartame:** There is disagreement in the scientific community about the safety of the artificial sweetener, *Aspartame*. The European Ramazzini Foundation (ERF) (an independent institution in Italy) says that it is a “*multipotential carcinogenic agent*” in rats. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) says that ERF’s study does “*not provide a scientific basis for reconsidering its use in foods. If any new information would become available in the future, EFSA will review these as a matter of priority.*” Coca Cola says *Aspartame* “*is one of the most thoroughly studied ingredients used in food and drink and has consistently been found to be safe.*”
- **Low-carb sweets:** “*The low-carb Kit Kat, for instance, has a virtuous-sounding net-carb value of just 4g, while a standard two-finger bar has 13g. The trouble is, nobody seems to be concerned about the calorie content. The extra fat needed to bulk up low-carb confectionery virtually negates removing the “ordinary” sugars. With the Kit Kat, you save just 14 calories.*” Amanda Ursell, *Sunday Times Style Magazine* 13.6.04 www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,8126-1145547,00.html
- **Low fat crisps:** Walkers is currently promoting crisps with 70% less saturated fat. But the overall fat content is still 30% and the number of calories remains the same. (*Sunday Times* 29.1.06)
- **‘Healthy’ vending machines:** Nestlé promoted its *Refuel:Pod* vending machine as helping children “*to make an informed and healthier choice*” about food and “*have a balanced lifestyle.... [driving] school vending into an exciting new area... built on six key principles essential to their growth, development and concentration....*” The 50 items listed in the *Standard Opening Order* were confectionary and snacks, such as *Rolo, Kit Kat, Milky Bar*, milk shakes and crisps. A ‘fruit pot’ is described as one portion of fruit. (*Times Educational Supplement*. 24.6.04)
- **Nutrition information:** In 2002 Nestlé sponsored the ‘nutrition section of a *Key Skills in Context* website which used the DFES logo without permission. The site linked to Nestlé’s website and boasted that “*Nestle products look and taste good and contribute to health and well-being.*” Nestlé’s *Fruitsome Bar* was promoted as having a high fruit content when in fact it contained 9% fruit, 36% sugar.



- **Borneo:** (see left) Nestle is sponsoring the Inter-Schools Swimming Championship with T-shirts and Milo drinks. **Milo is 46% sugar.** (May 06 *Borneo Bulletin Online*)

- **Jamaica:** Nestle is sponsoring school sports tracks “*Through the brands Klim and Milo, we hope to make them (athletes) so healthy that it shows, and through Milo, as the tag line goes, ‘the food drink of future champions’, we hope that this will be a sterling event in the next month.*” (*Jamaica Observer*, May 06)

- **Malaysia:** Nestlé is sponsoring 150 schools: “*Year Four pupil Muhammd Irfan Muhamed liked it when his group created a jingle for Koko Krunch using the tune from the children’s nursery rhyme, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. They did the jingle in front of the other pupils.*” (*New Straits Times* 23.4.06)

- At Codex Alimentarius meetings the baby food industry lobbies to weaken food standards so that they can promote breastmilk substitutes and to add cocoa to baby foods, knowing this will encourage a taste for chocolate.



Baby Milk Action’s education pack, *Seeing through the Spin, Public relations in the Global Economy* was created to help develop students’ critical faculties and to provide them with the tools they need to deconstruct the many subtle PR messages they receive:.

