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BBC Unit Puts Kid Characters on Promo Diet

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Mimi Turner

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BBC Worldwide, the public broadcaster's commercial arm, said Tuesday that it will no longer allow its children's television characters to be used in fast-food sponsorship deals after consumer groups accused it of promoting unhealthy junk foods.

BBC Worldwide said in a statement that it did not renew its "Tweenies" promotion deal with McDonald's after the contract expired July 4 and that it had no plans for further involvement with fast-food manufacturers.

The move follows a report published Monday from an international group of consumers' associations -- including the United Kingdom's Food Assn. -- which said that children as young as 2 were being targeted by advertising and promotions from such companies as Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's, Burger King, Kinder, Mars, Cadbury's, Nestle, Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

McDonald's U.K. representatives declined comment on the specific BBC contract but said that Happy Meals and the licensing arrangements that are part of them were just a small part of the McDonald's experience.

BBC Worldwide was among a number of marketing organizations accused of using children's characters to promote foods that are rich in sugar, salt and fat, contributing to a potentially unhealthy diet that could lead to later health problems.

Representatives of the BBC commercial division said Tuesday that the company is carrying out a full review of its sponsorship and licensing policies regarding children's food, stressing that it takes such ethical issues "very seriously."

"BBC Worldwide recognizes the concern over health issues surrounding children's food items, and we are currently undertaking a general review of our food

licensing policy," the company said in a statement, adding that the BBC employs the services of a nutritionist when choosing which foods should carry product sponsorship and constantly reviews its endorsement strategy.

But it said that using such preschool brands as "Tweenies," "Teletubbies" and "Fimbles" to promote some treat foods would be acceptable.

"BBC children's characters are not only about learning but are also about fun and entertainment," the statement said. "We work with nutritionists to provide a wide range of items that contribute to a child's diet, ranging from healthy options such as yogurt, dried fruit and organic pasta to items that are intended to be occasional treats."