
Business Week

A Food Fight Over Obesity in Kids

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September 30, 2004

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Retrieved 10/01/04 from

http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/sep2004/nf20040930_0110_db035.htm

A new government report aims to spark a multilevel assault on this ever-growing danger to America's youth

A study sponsored by the federal government released Sept. 30 says government, business, and families must address the alarming rate of obesity in children. This conclusion could lead to substantial curbs on advertising to children and distribution of junk food in public schools.

The report, titled *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, was prepared by the nonpartisan Institute of Medicine (part of the National Academy of Sciences) and commissioned by the Health & Human Services Dept. on behalf of Congress. It doesn't recommend a controversial junk-food tax that would make empty-calorie and high-fat food more expensive, or other formal government actions. But the IOM does prod schools to limit or ban food that doesn't meet good nutritional standards, and it calls on food and entertainment companies to voluntarily develop and implement guidelines for advertising directed at youth.

COKES AND FRIES. The report finds that the U.S. now has 9 million obese school-age children, 15% of all kids in the classroom. The prevalence of obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s for kids age 6-11 and doubled for teenagers. Obesity has even doubled for preschoolers over the last three decades. This is not a little extra baby-fat: Obese children are defined as those with a body-mass index at or above the 95th percentile for their age and height. Some 80% of these children will likely end up as obese adults.

The report comes out at a time when school systems are under fire for -- and rethinking -- their deals with companies like Coca-Cola ([KO](#)) and McDonald's ([MCD](#)), which pay

schools and sponsor sports fields in exchange for the right to distribute products to students. Arkansas passed a precedent-setting state law last year eliminating all vending machines from its schools and requiring that the body-mass index of every schoolchild be measured and reported to parents.

California has banned sales of junk food and soda in all its public schools. New York City, home to the nation's largest school system, has overhauled its school lunches, reducing the fat content of every meal by 30%. New Jersey is considering a ban on soda and junk food being sold on school grounds during school hours.

UNSTABLE PYRAMID? "New policies are urgently needed to ensure that all foods and beverages available at schools are consistent with nutrition guidelines," the report says. It calls for standards and guidelines to be set by the Agriculture Dept. That means, however, there will be plenty of political wrangling and lobbying to establish what foods are allowed in schools and which are excluded. Food companies have significantly influenced the Agriculture Dept. on matters such as the Food Guide Pyramid, which sets standards for school lunches.

Among the facts laid out in the report that will put advertisers on the defensive: The average child views more than 40,000 TV commercials each year and more than half of those promote high-calorie foods and beverages. And by the time kids reach the age of 14, 52% of boys and 32% of girls drink three or more eight-ounce sodas a day.

Although the report call for the government to do its part, efforts to fight obesity will have to be school- and community-based, experts say -- just as in the fight to rein in smoking. "The government is devoting almost no resources to this problem," says Kelly D. Brownwell, director of Yale University's Center for Eating & Weight Disorders. "Legislators tend to be on the side of the food industry on this one. But local actions all around the country are making a difference."

"PROFOUND INFLUENCE." The report also criticizes the decline in physical education in public schools. It found that only 8% of elementary schools, 6.4% of middle schools, and 5.8% of high schools provide daily physical education for their students. Yet a Rand Corp. study released in September found that ensuring five hours of phys ed per week to kindergartners would cut the prevalence of obesity in girls -- currently 10% -- by 43%. The study found, however, that kindergartners in fact averaged only 57 minutes of phys ed per week.

The role of mom and dad was emphasized in the report as well. "Parents can exert a profound influence on their children by promoting healthy foods and an active lifestyle from an early age and serving as role models," it says.

The Bush Administration has been trying to head off criticism that it hasn't been tough enough on the food industry and has been too lenient about advertising aimed at kids. Three U.S. Cabinet secretaries fanned out across the country on Sept. 28 to promote

healthier lifestyles, especially among school-age children. Visiting a handful of election battleground states, they also handed out grant money to support new health programs.

DOING THEIR BIT. Food companies that have drawn criticism for promoting unhealthy foods have been pushing new low-fat products and waging a public relations campaign to promote better eating habits. Frito-Lay ([PEP](#)) has started offering reduced-fat Doritos in school lunchrooms, while Oscar Mayer ([KFT](#)) has added applesauce and other healthier items to its Lunchables product line. Wendy's ([WEN](#)) has added orange slices to children's meals and has been more aggressive in promoting vegetables and fruit side dishes.

Dr. Jeffrey P. Koplan of Emory University, chairman of the IOM team that produced the obesity report, believes that the message will eventually reach Washington and the food industry. "We're talking about kids here," he says. "People know that kids don't make decisions on their own. We have to provide an environment that allows families to choose a healthier lifestyle."

That's a message that can't wait for a White House task force.