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Selling to—and selling out—children

Last week a couple of strange bedfellows met under the same roof in New York City. Kidscreen's fifth annual conference on Advertising and Promoting to Kids took place on one floor of the Yale Club, while on another floor a summit entitled Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children (SCEC) called attention to the effects of marketing and advertising on children's health (see p 1004). Kidscreen promised to teach attendees how to "own fun", create "lifelong consumers", reach ethnic and minority communities, and reportedly to obtain "share of mind" and to "own kids". SCEC speakers said the end result of these marketing efforts—at a cost to corporations of more than US\$12 billion a year—is a generation destined for psychosocial and physical problems.

The soaring increase in obesity and type 2 diabetes among children is a public-health crisis, plausibly linked to the "toxic environment" created in large part by the food industry. Supersize or extra-value portions mean that a single meal can provide more calories than most children require for an entire day. Advertising campaigns link food, soft drinks, and sports beverages to entertainment (movies, videos, video games, and celebrities) and toys. You can now buy Spiderman cereal and limited-edition toaster pastries. Children can make their own McDonald's Happy Meal, using Play-Doh and plastic moulds for each component; a coupon for the real thing is included with the set. The toymaker Mattel sells a Barbie doll who works at the McDonald's Playset drive-through. There, most ironically, that slimline icon can take your order for "all your fast-food favourites". Toys and books that either actually are food or are packaged with it now abound. Children can play chequers (draughts) with fruit-flavoured gummi candies (sweets), and learn to count in various calorie-filled and sugar-filled ways, through books that use sweets and cereals to teach maths.

These and other products are marketed to children through television, radio, and print media, at trade shows, in coupons, and through product placement in films and books. Soft-drink companies have pouring-rights contracts in schools; fast-food chains sell burgers, tacos, and the rest of their fare in school and hospital cafeterias; and the in-school television network Channel One serves up 2 minutes'

advertising in its daily 12-minute newscast. Marketing to children is a recent phenomenon; in the past 10 years, however, it has exploded in volume and variety. Companies increasingly do market research online, through panels and chat rooms, where growing pools of computer-literate children provide unfiltered responses more useful than any survey. These children are eagerly sought online as research subjects.

But children are not the only ones being exploited. Uninformed parents sign up their children on marketing sites that masquerade as educational ventures. And nutritionists are aggressively recruited by the food industry to lend legitimacy to their methods and products. These relationships, which can be extremely confusing to consumers, often go undisclosed on the resulting websites and in factsheets and published papers.

What can be done about this truly toxic state of affairs? Some solutions are obvious: nutrition professionals need to divorce themselves from the food industry, or at least declare with whom they are working. Parents need to wake up and smell the chip fat: fast-food chains are not educational institutions, no matter how many maths and reading flash-cards they hand out. More radical solutions should be considered: taxing soft drinks and fast foods; subsidising nutritious foods, like fruits and vegetables; labelling the content of fast food; and prohibiting marketing and advertising to children. An advertising ban similar to that on tobacco advertising has been recommended to the European Union. In the USA, litigation inspired by the success of the tobacco lawsuits is underway; parallels between the tactics of the tobacco and food industries are striking.

At the SCEC summit, Michael Brody, who chairs the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's television and media committee, said, "Just like paedophiles, marketers have become child experts". Strong words, perhaps. But it is time to return parents, teachers, and public-health professionals to their rightful roles as the real experts on children.

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