

Protecting children from harmful marketing practices



A. Gruber, A. Shepherd/Unsplash

Commercial marketing targets children and their caregivers to sell products that are often harmful to children’s health and well-being, such as alcohol, tobacco, breastmilk substitutes, and unhealthy foods, including sugar-sweetened beverages, according to a landmark WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission.

Companies target children because they influence parents’ household spending, and carry their brand loyalty over a lifetime. Caregivers likewise receive commercial messages exploiting their concern for children’s well-being. **Companies use sophisticated algorithms to target children** with advertising on social media and gaming apps, with limited regulation. Children’s personal data are sold between companies, with children’s profiles traded like commodities.

While companies profit hugely, children, families and societies pay the price. For example, inappropriate use of breastmilk substitutes is associated with lowered intelligence, obesity, and increased risk of diabetes – accounting for an estimated annual loss of \$302 billion worldwide.¹ Similarly, pervasive promotion of unhealthy food and beverages is implicated in the rapid rise in childhood obesity, with an 11-fold increase in obese children and adolescents from 1975 to 2016.²

Marketing to children is deliberate, strategic, innovative, and well-resourced, and exploits their developmental vulnerability. **Marketers increasingly reach children via digital platforms** that follow them everywhere, as well as sponsorship of sports teams, premium offers and even the use of ‘kidfluencers’ to blur the line between entertainment and advertising. As a result, children are enormously exposed to highly effective advertising. According to the WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission report:

- Children see as many as **30,000 advertisements** on TV alone in a single year.³
- Advertising exposure is associated with the **purchase of unhealthy foods** by families of small children, with greater exposure linked to overweight and obesity in children.
- Among five- and six-year-olds in Brazil, China, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan, **68% could identify at least one cigarette brand logo** (in China, this number reaches 86%).
- In the United Kingdom, one in eight children aged 11–16 years **follows a gambling company** on social media, while gambling is associated with stress, disruption of study, and relationship conflict.

Governments must act urgently to protect children.

Studies in Australia, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand, Spain, Sri Lanka, the United States, and other countries confirm that industry self-regulation does not provide adequate protection to children and there are many examples of companies violating voluntary agreements not to market to children. Lessons from countries that banned tobacco ads and sponsorship demonstrate the effectiveness of comprehensive statutory restrictions.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Pass national laws that regulate commercial marketing to children

Heads of state and government should demonstrate political leadership by introducing national legislation to regulate commercial marketing to children.

Build networks of support

Civil society, health professionals and young people should demand action and collaborate on campaigns to support such regulation.

Adopt an Optional Protocol to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child

Governments should initiate consideration of the Optional Protocol through procedures established by the U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. General Assembly.

1. Rollins NC et al. Why invest, and what it will take to improve breastfeeding practices? *The Lancet* 2016, 387: 491–504.

2. Abarca-Gómez et al. Worldwide trends in body-mass index, underweight, overweight, and obesity from 1975 to 2016. *The Lancet* 2017, 390: 2627–2642.

3. Carr S et al. Child and adolescent exposure to alcohol advertising in Australia—major televised sports. *Drug Alcohol Res* 2016, 35(4): 406–411.

Read the WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission report:

<http://www.thelancet.com/futurechild>