



International Association for the Study of Obesity

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Opinions split on junk food ads

Key players in the argument over advertising junk food to children are unable to agree what should be done.

Research published today reveals deep divisions between economic interests – primarily the food industry and the advertising agencies – on the one side, and health interests represented by consumer groups, family organisations and public health bodies on the other.

Interviews with senior members of UK national organisations found little room for agreement, with differences of opinion over the strength of the evidence, the likely impact of advertising on children, the value of voluntary measures by the food industry and the need for government regulation.

Researchers at the International Association for the Study of Obesity, based in London, questioned over twenty key players in industry, public health, government and media organisations, and representatives of consumers, families and children. *'Views were deeply split,'* said project director Dr Tim Lobstein. *'The opportunities for finding common ground look slim at present, and we urge the government to take a clear lead on how to move the issue forward.'*

Child obesity rates in the UK have risen steeply in the last twenty years, from fewer than one in twenty children overweight to more than one in four. The latest figures show the levels stabilising but, warned Dr Lobstein *'We need to see a sharp decline in child obesity numbers before we start to relax'*.

In 2007 the government began introducing controls on TV advertising for sweet and fatty foods, but official figures show that these measures have only cut the numbers of such TV ads seen by children by barely one third. Meanwhile food companies have turned increasingly to other ways of persuading children to buy sweet and fatty foods, using the internet, SMS texting, and embedded adverts in computer games. *'While some companies realise they have a responsibility to help children eat healthily, others are doing all they can to find new ways of promoting unhealthy foods to children, often by-passing parents and getting to kids directly using new technology,'* said Dr Lobstein.

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Notes:

The research report *MARKETING FOOD AND BEVERAGES TO CHILDREN - STAKEHOLDER VIEWS ON POLICY OPTIONS IN THE UK. Findings from the PolMark project* is available to download at <http://www.polmarkproject.net/>.

PolMark is the acronym for Policies on Marketing of Food and Beverages to Children.

The PolMark project is part of a pan-European examination of controls on advertising to children being conducted in 11 EU member states (other countries are Ireland, France, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Cyprus).

For further details see <http://www.polmarkproject.net> and see also http://ec.europa.eu/eahc/projects/linkedocument/Fichepolmark_France_english.pdf

In 2008 Ofcom reviewed the effectiveness of the TV advertising ban by comparing children's exposure to advertising for HFSS foods (those high in fat, sugar and/or salt) in 2007-8 with data for 2005 and found an overall 34% reduction. This is expected to rise to 41% when all the controls are in place in 2009. See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tv/reports/hfssdec08/>

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