

## Marketing and advertising: harmful to children's health

One of the biggest contributors to the explosive increase in childhood obesity, including such complications as type 2 diabetes, is aggressive marketing and advertising by the food industry, according to a group called Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children Coalition (SCEC). The group held its second annual Summit on the Commercialisation of Childhood in New York City on Sept 20.

Susan Linn (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA) said that in the early 20th century, children did hard physical work in factories, with the result that companies essentially owned their bodies. Now marketers are attempting to own children's minds.

Although marketing to children has been seen as acceptable only in the past decade or so, corporations have seized the advantage quickly: in 1999 they spent approximately US\$12 billion on such efforts. Part of the philosophy now, according to Bob Ahuja, a professor of marketing at Xavier University (Cincinnati, OH), is not to appeal directly to parents, but to teach kids to influence their parents' purchases.

Children inundated with commercialism and surrounded by rampant materialism suffer not only from obesity but also from body-image and other emotional problems, eating disorders, and tendencies toward violence. "The sick child as viewer/consumer has replaced the healthy child of play, sports, and make-believe", said Michael Brody (University of Maryland and chair of the TV/Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry). Brody noted that while storytelling is the very essence of play, with toys as its catalyst, today's toys, with their commercial links, actually act as "story blockers".

The food industry now links food with entertainment, especially

with movie and cartoon characters. Brand-name foods and drinks appear on toy cars and helicopters and fast-food chains issue "educational" card games. Diane Levin (Wheelock College, Boston, MA) demonstrated some toys of a darker nature: these "sound pops" or "hot licks" are "interactive candies" that incorporate a lollipop into a battery-operated handle. The lollipop spins or the toy is activated when "your tongue turns it on". She called attention to the "sexualisation" of these products, which are designed for children as young as 4 years old. Levin also described a new television show for children that promotes food as entertainment. In the show, called "Food Feud", foods become transformed into monsters. The show's promotional materials say it is "the perfect recipe--for fun and outrageousness! Kids--you'll never look at food the same way again. And next time Mom says to finish your dinner--you'd better listen--before it finishes you!"

The relentless onslaught of advertising for food products contributed to the unprecedented weight gain seen during the past 2 decades in children in genetically stable populations. Cara Ebbeling (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA) said that increased consumption of fast food parallels the rise in obesity rates among children. In the 1970s children received about 2% of their total caloric intake from fast food. In the 1990s that number rose to 10%.

Obesity is not the only health issue linked to the food industry. Increased exposure to "oversexualised and underfed images" in the media is correlated with increased dieting and body-image problems in girls, according to Margo Maine (Hartford, CT), who counsels children with eating disorders. Furthermore, Nancy Carlsson-Paige (Lesley University, Boston, MA) said that an increase in the number and intensity of

violent acts shown in the media, as well as violent toys linked to cartoons or products, leads children to imitate violence instead of to play.

In view of these adverse effects on children's mental and physical health, speakers urged action, ranging from taxes and regulation to total bans on advertising to children. Alvin Poussaint (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA), the summit's moderator, concluded, "the trend is accelerating and it's time we responded honestly to marketing's impact on our most vulnerable citizens--children".

*Faith McLellan*

### Schools' role in health promotion

During Sept 25-27, nearly 400 delegates came together in Egmond aan Zee, Netherlands, to discuss how better to link children's education with the promotion of health in schools. The conference, convened by the European Network of Health Promoting Schools, was organised with the aim of sharing best practices. Notably, however, the conference also aimed to harness political commitment to bring the health and education sectors closer together. Participants also focused on young people's attitudes and values towards risk-taking, and the impact that schools can have on these attitudes.