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Schools Teach 3 C's: Candy, Cookies and Chips

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School is back in session, but do you know what your children are learning about a matter of lifelong importance? That matter is food and drink, the substances that sustain health and life.

But in more and more schools nationwide, children from kindergarten through high school are being taught that "nutrition" comes in boxes of fast foods, candy wrappers and soft-drink cans and bottles.

In many schools, fast-food companies have co-opted the lunch program, and children have ready access to soft-drink and snack machines. In the classroom, too, children in 12,000 schools are required to watch a 12-minute television program every day with two minutes of commercials from companies like McDonald's, Hershey, Pepsico, Coca-Cola, KFC, Frito-Lay, Domino's and 7Up.

As Dr. Marion Nestle of New York University points out in her illuminating book "Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health" (University of California Press, 2002, \$29.95), "Given their purchasing power, numbers, potential as future customers and captive status, it is no wonder that food companies view schoolchildren as an unparalleled marketing opportunity."

To be sure, in exchange for advertising and the opportunity to sell their nutritionally wanting products in schools, corporations often contribute money and materials desperately needed by schools.

These companies pay for sports uniforms, scoreboards, computers and other items, some of which carry the company logo.

When children's books are protected by covers bearing, say, the Coca-Cola logo, they see an advertising message even while they do their schoolwork.

"Many commercial activities produced no tangible benefits for the school, although the benefits to advertisers were quite evident," added Dr. Nestle, who heads N.Y.U.'s department of nutrition and food studies.

For example, advertisers may offer children free samples and coupons for fast food and sponsor Channel One closed-circuit programs viewed daily by 8.3 million schoolchildren, who see 2 minutes of commercial messages along with 10 minutes of news and features.

But not every school official is in favor of this noxious trend. Dr. Nestle quotes Jill Wynns of the San Francisco school board: "The law requires your future customers to come to a place 180 days a year where they must watch and listen to your advertising messages exclusively. Your competitors are not allowed access to the market. The most important public institution in the lives of children and families gives its implied endorsement to your products. The police and schools enforce the requirement that the customers show up and stay for the show."

Lessons Start Early

Beginning in preschool, children are exposed to thousands of messages from advertisers that can corrupt the food lessons their parents hope to teach them. For example, Dr. Nestle cites the public television program for toddlers called "Teletubbies," sponsored first by Burger King and then by McDonald's, which distributed toys representing the four Teletubby characters.

Then there are Saturday mornings, when parents may hope to catch some extra sleep while their young children are bombarded by television advertising for what Dr. Nestle calls "foods and beverages of dubious nutritional value: presweetened breakfast cereals, candy, fast foods, sodas, cookies, chips."

Not one commercial for fruits, vegetables, bread or fish was shown, according to a study published in *The Journal of the American Dietetic Association*.

Many studies have shown that young children do not readily distinguish program content from commercials.

And, to make it even more difficult, commercials these days look and sound more and more like the programs. To Dr. Nestle, "food marketing to children is big business aimed at uncritical minds."

Even some of the books bought for toddlers carry a not-so-hidden commercial message. For example, I bought my grandsons, who was then a year old, a Cheerios counting book (Cheerios being a nutritious nonsugar-coated cereal) but rejected the books featuring Kellogg's Fruit Loops and Oreo Cookies.

As Dr. Nestle wrote, "The Oreo book requires children to count (and presumably eat) their way through 10 cookies before reaching 'and now there are none.' "

Once children are in school, the commercial lessons continue. More and more school lunch programs now offer brand-name fast foods.

Some schools have turned their entire lunch programs over to management companies that bring in nothing but fast foods, in the process forfeiting the federal reimbursements offered to schools that meet government nutritional standards.

Of course, the children are required to pay a lot more for these meals — \$2 or \$3 instead of 40 cents — which may make them out of reach for children from low-income families, the very children school lunch programs were designed to help.

More Pop, Less Milk

Some districts sign "pouring-rights contracts" and they result in soda-pop vending machines in thousands of schools in return for big bucks the schools say they desperately need.

The companies may even offer bonuses to schools that exceed stated sales targets.

For example, in 1997 the 53-school Colorado Springs district signed an \$8-million, 10-year agreement with Coca-Cola that included cash bonuses for extra sales and incentives like a new car for a senior with high grades and a perfect attendance record.

As you might guess, the students comply. As reported in the American Journal of Public Health, "What we have seen in just about every exclusive contract around the country is a resulting increase in the amount of soda consumed by students."

Vending machines are going into schools that did not previously have them and even into elementary schools.

Also, as you might expect, as children drink more soft drinks, which offer no redeeming nutritional value (the Center for Science in the Public Interest calls them "liquid candy"), they consume less of the nutritious drinks like milk and fruit juices. Fruit drinks that contain 5 percent fruit juice to meet government standards still have too little of the natural product to be considered nutritious, Dr. Nestle said.

Can this trend be curbed? "By the end of 2000, more than 30 school districts in California, Tennessee and Wisconsin, for example, had refused such deals after protests by parents, students and school officials," Dr. Nestle reported.

"Philadelphia refused an offer from Coca-Cola for \$43 million over a 10-year period," she said, "and Michigan turned down a contract that would have covered 110 school districts encompassing nearly half a million students."

What is needed now is legislation at the national level, laws with enforcement teeth. So if you are a parent concerned about your child's health, pay attention to the nutrition messages the children receive at school and at home and write to your representatives in Congress about the need for national action.