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Fat chance of taking food off kids' TV

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IN the world of television advertising, food has become the new tobacco. Just as it slowly became unacceptable and finally illegal to advertise cigarettes on TV 20 years ago, so is the anti-junk food movement gaining momentum.

This month three state health departments joined child advocates in calling for a limit on fast food ads on TV to combat childhood obesity.

But the response from the federal Government has been swift and unequivocal, Health Minister Tony Abbott saying: "Ads don't make people fat, what they eat makes people fat."

With an estimated \$200 million a year spent on snack food advertising in Australia, the stakes are high.

But just as the call for restrictions grows, new areas of advertising revenue are opening up. While commercial networks — and of course the ABC — are not allowed to advertise during preschool programs such as *Hi-5* or *New MacDonal's Farm*, there are no such limits on pay TV. For many parents, the children's channels are a drawcard in deciding whether to subscribe. They would no doubt be surprised to discover their advertisers are targeting tots as young as two.

Next month, toy-maker Hasbro and learning products and games company V-Tech will sponsor the *Tiny TV* timeslot on the Cartoon Network, which runs from 1pm to 2pm, targeting children two to six. Despite concerns about childhood obesity, *Tiny TV* is open to food advertisers wanting to reach the viewers of *Postman Pat* and *Merlin the Magical Puppy*.

It is a significant development in an industry that has always been forced by the regulators to stay away from the 0-5 age group. "Cartoon Network does not exclude any regular category of advertisers on *Tiny TV*," says Sally Cunningham, Australia and New Zealand

and executive director for Turner Entertainment Networks Asia. "[But] we are very conscious of the sensitive nature of the preschool market and have guidelines as to what advertisements we allow to be seen."

Revenues for the Cartoon Network grew by 40 per cent last year, well ahead of the 32 per cent growth in general pay-TV advertising. Cunningham says advertising from snack food, confectionery and toy manufacturers has been supplemented by fast food chains such as McDonald's and KFC, and breakfast cereal maker Kellogg's, which are among the channel's biggest clients. (Log on to the Cartoon Network website and you'll be greeted by a pop-up ad for Happy Meals.)

Free-to-air broadcasters would arguably love the same leeway. Forced by law to screen some preschool programs, each network generally has only one. It is no secret they dislike being forced into such programming because it is not a revenue generator. Pay TV, however, sees the revenue potential in preschool programming, including sponsorships and advertising, targeting toddlers and their parents.

The only dedicated preschool channel, Nick Jr, already takes advertising but limits it to one minute an hour, according to Anthony Fitzgerald, chief executive of Foxtel sales arm MCN.

"We are self-regulated but we apply all of the same codes, particularly when it comes to kids, teens and youth," he says.

In December, Disney will launch its own dedicated preschool channel, Playhouse Disney Channel, and, as with the Disney Channel, it will not take advertising.

Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association chief executive Deb Richards says each channel makes

its own decision as to whether to advertise to children, so the standards vary widely.

However, she says there are general guidelines that they all abide by and one of the conditions of holding a licence is that advertising revenue cannot exceed subscription revenue.

Fitzgerald says that while P-rated programs on free-to-air TV are not allowed to accept advertising, toddlers and older children still watch other shows that carry ads.

Indeed, a study by media buying agency MindShare last year showed advertisers don't need to advertise in children's TV timeslots to have them take notice. Carlton Draught and Hahn Premium Light beers ranked among the most popular TV ads among children eight to 14.

Last week, VicHealth chief executive Rob Moodie called for a ban on junk food advertising in children's peak viewing times from 5pm to 9pm, and earlier this month NSW Health Minister John Hatzistergos called for children's advertising to be capped or banned. Hatzistergos was armed with NSW Health research showing children are unfairly targeted by junk food advertising. The NSW health department is conducting an obesity trial and will run an \$800,000 anti-obesity advertising campaign in NSW aimed at helping parents to address the problem next year.

Liz Develin, director of the Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Advancement, says that next to the 77 fast food ads children see each week, the advertiser-funded Jo Lively cartoon and federal government healthy lifestyle advertising campaigns is "relatively insignificant".

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Develin says government funding should be allocated to quantify the link between advertising and obesity. "We would suggest that there is evidence that TV ads influence pester power and [children's] own choices when they have food presented to them," Develin says. "If people think that's not linked to weight, that's illogical."

To Abbott it is not illogical at all.

"If parents are worried that their kids are getting fat, well, parents can readily do something about it by taking the soft drink out of the fridge, by taking the fast food off the menu, by trying to ensure that the kids walk to school rather than just get driven to school," he says in response to Hatzistergos. "These are the things that we ought to do about fat kids rather than think there's some magic bullet by banning advertising."

Children's advertising lobby groups such as Young Media Australia and the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children strongly disagree. CFAC chairwoman Kaye Mehta is about to launch a study through Flinders University in South Australia that asks children how food advertising influences their eating habits. She has also called for a ban on junk food advertising between 5pm and 9pm.

"Parents are constantly having to fight with their children [about food choices]. Advertisers are not helping parents and yet the advertisers constantly say it's the parents' responsibility," Mehta says. "We're at an impasse where our federal Government seems to have bowed to industry pressure not to regulate, not to restrict advertising

... Our Government should actually step in to regulate advertising to children in the same way that they regulated alcohol advertising and cigarette advertising."

The European Commission has warned the food industry to curb junk food advertising to children or risk a ban, while the British industry has until 2007 to fall in line. Sweden and Quebec have banned junk food advertising to children outright.

In February, McDonald's Australia said it had reduced advertising in children's TV viewing by 60 per cent since 2001, but that has not stopped it advertising on pay TV, in children's magazines, on related websites or in early evening TV timeslots.

Any further regulation could depend on the outcome of a \$3 million national nutrition and physical activity survey to be commissioned by the federal agriculture and health departments, with some funding from the Australian Food and Grocery Council, to report on child obesity levels by mid next year.

Almost two years ago, the federal Government's National Obesity Taskforce released the Healthy Weight 2008 report, which recommended the Government "undertake research to understand and assess the impact of current food and drinks advertising practices" on obesity, but no research has been conducted.

Instead the Government last year announced a four-year \$116 million package to address childhood obesity, including an \$11 million advertising and information program and an after-school physical activity program. Ear-

lier this year the federal Government ran the "2+5" campaign, advising children to eat two serves of fruit and five of vegetables per day, and recently appointed advertising agency JWT to create advertising promoting physical activity. The Australian Association of National Advertisers launched its own "Eat well, play well, live well" advertising campaign in June, supported by advertising space donated by media companies, featuring the Jo Lively cartoon character.

Big-spending national advertisers including Kraft, Coca-Cola and Nestle, last year ramped up lobbying activities in Canberra. The Australian Association of National Advertisers argues that no direct link has been proven between advertising and obesity, and parental actions are far more influential than any ban would be.

In Melbourne this week two mothers took their own action. They launched a product endorsement program called Kids Connect, which puts a tick of approval on products judged by an independent panel of experts to be good for kids. Directors Rachel Knott and Kate Evans say it fills in the gap between advertisers' claims and the full facts about a product.

Advertisers who sign up and whose products are deemed eligible will receive infomercial-style TV ads promoting their product. Two food companies are in negotiations to sign up.

"Our aim is to empower parents and assist them to make their children healthier," Evans says.





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NOT SO SLIM PICKINGS

■ An average Australian child is exposed to 77 ads for foods high in fat and-or sugar per week.

■ Confectionery and fast food are the most advertised food categories during children's viewing hours.

■ Confectionery advertisements are three times more likely to be broadcast during children's programs than adult programs.

■ Fast food advertisements are twice

as likely to be broadcast during children's programs as they are during adult programs.

■ Half of all food ads promote foods high in fat and sugar.

■ In Australia, the number of overweight children increased from 10 per cent in 1985 to 16 per cent in 1995. Obesity increased from 1 per cent to 5 per cent.

Source: NSW Health