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Taking aim at advertising that sweet-talks children

A new venture will promote healthier food for youngsters, writes **Paul McIntyre**.

The questionable marketing tactics of some of the country's biggest children's food brands are in for a shake-up from a new Heart Foundation-style tick, to be launched in November, which will independently endorse nutritionally sound products.

Kellogg's Coco-Pops and Corn-flakes, Nestle's new Cheerios and Milo cereals, Mother Earth snack bars from Cadbury Schweppes and some flavoured milks are just a few products that fail to get a nod from the new Kids Connect tick, which is designed to help parents make more informed choices in the supermarket.

Childhood obesity has been a hot national issue for nearly two years but Kids Connect founders Rachel Knott and Kate Evans say there has not been enough action from governments and the food industry to help parents address the problem.

The NSW Government, however, has been pushing ahead with its school canteen project, which bans products such as Coca-Cola and salty, fatty snacks such as Smith's chips.

Knott and Evans's concept, which has been three years in development, is an independent brand to endorse children's products that meet stringent criteria for acceptable levels of fibre, sodium, sugar and energy and saturated fats.

They have pitched it to at least 25 food companies in the past six

weeks and say the response has been "very enthusiastic".

But food manufacturers in recent years have proven adept at inventing new marketing claims for products that appear healthier while maintaining the status quo in nutritional values. A common tactic is to find a single health attribute such as vitamin content and market it heavily as a consumer benefit while making little change to the product.

"I suspect food companies hope they will be able to persuade the Kids Connect people that their products are good options, probably in cases where the Kids Connect people would think otherwise," says nutritionist Rosemary Stanton.

"It's a common tactic and evident in companies' emphasis on promoting potentially good features while masking problems.

"If you look at Coco-Pops, it promotes vitamins and minerals while ignoring the high sugar content and lack of fibre."

Knott and Evans say they are aware of the food industry's marketing tactics. Rather than hawking the Kids Connect endorsement to food players carte blanche, the company has vetted products from specific companies via an independent panel of nutritionists and dieticians. The panel is chaired by Judith Appleton, Deakin University's head of professional practice in nutrition and dietetics and food

commodities. Kids Connect then meets with the relevant companies to discuss their interest in endorsing specific products.

Knott and Evans plan to promote the first Kids Connect-backed products in November in a similar fashion to the information-based advertising approach used by the Brand Power TV commercials.

Like Brand Power, Kids Connect will use its own information-based marketing "template" and advertising personalities to promote endorsed products.

In the case of Mother Earth, Kids Connect would endorse its popcorn range but not the "healthy" snack bars. Vita-Brits, Weetbix, porridge (not flavoured or the quick-cook variety) and Go-Gurts (but not Yo-Go dairy desserts) could carry the Kids Connect tick and be promoted by TV, magazines, radio, online and public relations campaigns fronted by Kids Connect hosts, including Network Ten's Chyka Keebaugh.

"If the current trends continue, 50 per cent of our kids will be obese by 2020," Evans says. "That's horrendous. There's a lot of issues with obesity and being overweight that parents don't understand and know. There's a lot going on under the skin."



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Monica Waters ... some additives linked to illnesses. Photo: Nicole Emanuel