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MARKETING

Unhealthy food for children? Fat chance

By **PAUL McINTYRE**

THE marketing tactics for some of the biggest children's food brands in the country are in for a king hit if two frustrated Melbourne mothers have their way.

Kellogg's Coco Pops and Cornflakes, Nestle's new Cheerios and Milo cereals, all manner of flavoured milks and Mother Earth snack bars from Cadbury Schweppes are just a few of the products that fail outright to get a nod from a new independently endorsed Heart Foundation-style tick campaign — under the Kids Connect label — designed to help parents make better food choices in the supermarket.

Childhood obesity has been a hot national issue for nearly two years but the way Kids Connect founders Rachel Knott and Kate Evans see it, there's been too much talk and not enough action from governments and the food industry for parents to sort through the food mess.

For the past six weeks Ms Knott and Ms Evans have been presenting their idea to key food industry representatives (it's been three years in devel-

opment) for an independent brand to endorse products that meet stringent criteria for acceptable amounts of fibre, sugar and saturated fats for children.

At least 25 food companies have met the duo, who say the response has been enthusiastic.

However, manufacturers have proved adept at continuing to produce the same food while applying new marketing claims that make their products appear healthier.

A classic approach is for marketers to find a single health attribute such as calcium or a vitamin, market it heavily as a consumer benefit but make little alteration to the fundamentals of a product. Now, with the chance of deploying an independent but commercially minded endorsement for their children's food lines, food producers could be forgiven for thinking they may have another useful marketing tactic.

Not on your life, say Ms Knott and Ms Evans, who plan to roll out their idea in November in a similar fashion to the information-based advertising

approach successfully used by the likes of the Brand Power TV commercials.

"I'm a mother of three kids and I thought was quite intelligent reading food labels," says Ms Knott. "What I've learnt is that it's a minefield. The information is not 100 per cent accurate. Parents just get totally lost."

Ms Knott and Ms Evans say that rather than hawking their branded endorsement concept to food players carte blanche, they have vetted the products from specific companies via an independent panel of nutritionists and dietitians, chaired by Judith Appleton, Deacon University's head of Professional Practice in Nutrition and Dietetics and Food Commodities.

Kids Connect then meets with relevant companies to discuss interest on specific products that can be endorsed.

Hence, in the case of Mother Earth, Kids Connect will endorse its popcorn range but not the "healthy" snack bars. Vita-Brits, Weetbix, porridge (not flavoured or the fast cooking variety) and Go-Gurts (but not Yo-Go dairy desserts)

could carry the Kids Connect tick and be promoted via TV, magazine, radio, online, and PR 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," says Ms Evans. "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."



Rachel Knott (left) and Kate Evans are campaigning with Kids Connect.