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Fat or Fiction: Is banning advertising the answer to childhood obesity?

The fact is that children are getting fatter and Australia is now challenging the US as the fattest nation on earth. And it seems that many people are keen to apportion this blame to the advertising of junk foods.

Banning the advertising of junk food would be a simple and easy-to-administer solution. But it is the right solution? Will it work?

Research shows it would be a popular solution. A ban on junk food advertising to children has the support of 89% of Australians, with 64% strongly in favour. The nine country study by Lightspeed Research showed support for restrictions on junk food advertising was highest in Australia. Even higher than in the UK where junk food advertising is already banned!

Perhaps a reason for the widespread support on a ban on advertising is the ongoing activities of lobby groups. The Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), a national advocacy group made up of industry bodies such as Nutrition Australia and the Australian Consumers Association, has issued a 16-page report detailing the effects of obesity, the volume and content of food advertising and Australia's regulatory controls. Yet even this powerful lobby group admits that **there is no proof that advertising contributes to obesity**. However, this does not stop them lobbying for a ban on advertising.

It was the same in Canada. After banning junk food advertising in Quebec, Canada, it was found that "Childhood obesity in Quebec is not appreciably different from the rest of Canada, but it is unrealistic for any single intervention to affect such a multifactorial problem."

Same in Britain. The British Office of Communications that concluded a total ban of the advertising of junk food to children would be ineffective, as television advertising has a "modest direct effect". It suggested other factors such as exercise and family eating patterns as more influential. Compounding this, 70% of all children's viewing is outside children's airtime, so even a total ban on advertising in children's programs would not solve the problem. Despite this, advertising was banned in Britain.

Are we banning advertising to keep the lobby groups happy or to effect any real solution to this problem?

Dr Tim Gill, chief executive of the Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity (ASSO), said pressure for further restrictions is building from all sectors of society. "It's not just loony public health people expressing some 'way out' desire." He believes further restrictions are "inevitable" as strong public concern is combined with more active lobbying by influential health bodies including the Cancer Council and Heart Foundation.





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Advertising is currently regulated in Australia through a system of self-regulation, administered by the advertising body, the AANA. Anyone can make a complaint about any advertising and this complaint is investigated by a panel. Furthermore, Australia has an outright ban on all advertising to under 5's in Australia, which is rare globally. Like the British study, it is also recognized that a total ban on advertising would undermine investment in children's television programs.

And if we drive marketers from advertising on television, they are likely to target the internet, which is a totally unregulated promotional environment.

Australian Consumers Association senior policy officer Clare Hughes said regulating food and beverage advertising will do little to stop the marketing of unhealthy foods during children's programs. Promotion would continue over the internet or through the use of children's characters and giveaways in fast food outlets.

Her concerns were supported by the wave of marketing opportunity that followed the launch Shrek 3. Kellogg, for example, relabelled eight products to feature the green ogre and created a special promotional website. Spokeswoman for the Parents Jury, Dr Anna Peeters said, "Given the current childhood obesity crisis, it is amazing just how many food companies are using this movie promotion to market nutritionally poor products. It is even more amazing that the makers of *Shrek* are choosing to be associated with such unhealthy food. Many of the products are also accompanied with extra incentives such as free stickers or one in three chances to win a prize," she said.

So is it fat or fiction? Would a ban on junk food advertising in children's shows solve childhood obesity? There is no evidence to suggest such a ban would be successful. But that did not stop governments in Canada, the UK and New Zealand from banning advertising. Nor does it stop the lobby groups from pushing to have the advertising banned.

(Sources: *Nina Lees, "Parents condemn Shrek marketing", AdNews, 15 Jun 2007;* *Andrea Sophocleous, "Damage Control", AdNews, 20 Apr 2007;* *Nina Lees, "Aussies want junk food restrictions" AdNews, 5 April, 2007;* *Matthew Eaton, "ACMA puts kids' TV under spotlight", AdNews, 23 Mar 2007;* *Mark Chenery, "Junk Food Ad Bans Looms", Ad News, 12 Jan 2007;* *The Australian, July 24, 2006;* *Dave Clutterbuck, "Labor's call for ad ban at odds with obesity study", AdNews, 9 Jun 2004.*

Questions to consider:

1. Why do you think there is no much support for a ban on junk food advertising, when there is so little evidence that it would work?
2. Draw up a list of the arguments for and against banning junk food advertising in children's television time.
3. If you were an advertiser, like Kelloggs, would you continue to advertise?

