

NZ falling behind on international rules to protect kids from food marketing

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Summary

Aotearoa New Zealand is not measuring up in relation to new guidelines released this month by the World Health Organization (WHO) which recommend policies to protect children from the harmful impacts of food marketing. This Briefing outlines how NZ falls short, and how doing so jeopardises the nation's ability to meet its commitments on children's rights.

When children eat food, it is about more than just obtaining kilojoules and nutrients for growing bodies. For kids, food is also about developing tastes, trying different textures and learning how certain foods make their bodies feel. Food connects us to people, cultures and the environment, and can be a source of great enjoyment. These benefits are interrupted by unhealthy food and drink marketing which actively targets and pursues children as present and future consumers of products for profit. These products have negative short- and long-term impacts on children's health² and are some of the largest contributors to global plastic pollution³.

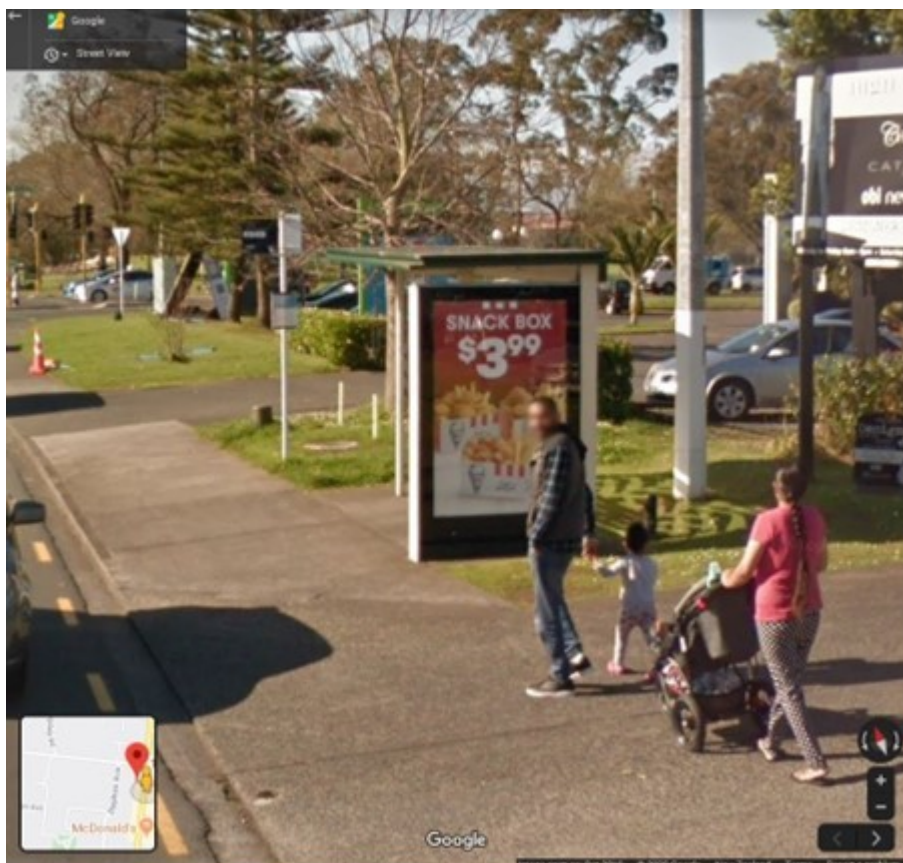
Recently WHO released a new set of guidelines on policies¹ needed to protect children from the harmful impacts of food marketing, see Box 1.

Box 1. WHO recommendations

“implementation of policies to restrict marketing of foods high in saturated fatty acids, trans-fatty acids, free sugars and/or salt to which children are exposed, and that such policies:

- be mandatory;
- protect children of all ages;
- use a government-led nutrient profile model to classify foods to be restricted from marketing;
- be sufficiently comprehensive to minimize the risk of migration of marketing to other media, to other spaces within the same medium or to other age groups; and
- restrict the power of food marketing to persuade”^{1, p xii}.

Only voluntary industry-led policies and bylaws exist in relation to marketing junk food/drink to children in New Zealand. These policies do not cover all children (only those aged under 13 years)⁴, are ineffective⁵, rarely upheld⁶, ambiguously worded and poorly enforced⁵. As a result of this laissez faire policy environment children are targeted by food and drink companies in their classrooms, homes and neighbourhoods every day.⁷ The image below taken near a playground illustrates the way advertising pervades every area of children’s lives.⁸



Marketing unhealthy food and drink. A Google streetview image captured as part of wider study examining marketing at bus stops. Source: Huang et al. (2020).

Food marketing shapes eating norms, food preferences and dietary behaviours. This frequent and pervasive exposure to unhealthy food and drink marketing has public health implications towards poorer dietary behaviours, specifically increases in food intake, choice, preference, and purchase requests.² The exposure is inequitable. The evidence is clear children living in less well-off neighbourhoods are exposed to more than twice as much marketing than their peers in more affluent areas.⁸⁻¹² Tamariki Māori are disproportionately represented in these areas and therefore face more harm than most.

Aotearoa's obligation to do more

The WHO and the United Nations assert food marketing is a children's rights concern, negatively impacting several rights, specifically, the right to health, adequate and nutritious food, privacy and being free from exploitation (13). The latter two rights are a mounting concern as more and more marketing is reaching children through digital channels, where personal data is used to target children to receive even more marketing. The interactive component which often accompanies digital marketing is a tactic used to boost the marketing effect and result in more products purchased and consumed.

New Zealand was one of the first countries to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹³, which states:

Countries that are State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child have legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfil these rights and are required to take immediate action to implement these obligations as a matter of priority. State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child are therefore obliged to take action toward the fulfilment and realization of children's rights, which should include actions to protect children from marketing of less-healthy foods, which inhibits children's rights, such as the rights to health, adequate and nutritious food, privacy and freedom from exploitation.^{1, p.20}

By allowing food and drink companies to target children in their classrooms, on their screens and in the neighbourhoods where they live play and learn, NZ is failing in its commitments to protect children's rights.

Regulating to limit the marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks to children would ensure their rights are protected and could reduce health inequities particularly for tamariki Māori. We need to stop linking unhealthy foods and drinks with hedonic pleasure and rewards in the form of plastic toys and special deals and instead send a message to children that they have value in this world that is more than simply being an agent of capitalism, a consumer of products.

What's new in this Briefing?

- The WHO has released new guidelines on policies to protect children from the harmful impacts of food marketing.
- New Zealand currently falls short in implementing recommended policies.

Implications for public health policy and practices

- Failure to implement stronger policies may jeopardise the fulfilment of NZ's obligations to uphold child rights.
- The Government needs to develop and implement mandatory policies to restrict unhealthy food and drink marketing to children of all ages.

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This article is endorsed by the Food Policy Expert Panel at Health Coalition Aotearoa.

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