

The Weight of Childhood Obesity
Riki Emerson
Helena College University of Montana

Abstract

This paper is an exploration into the rise of childhood obesity rates over the last 30 years and several potential causes. Specifically addressed are the increased consumption of soft drinks and energy drinks, marketing of processed food, and the deficits in the school lunch program. The current generation of children is expected to lead a shorter lifespan than their parents and the food industry is to blame.

"Imagine going through life and carrying around seven sacks of potatoes...that's what it's like for these overweight children. It's taxing on their hearts, organs. It's hurting them tremendously. And society isn't helping" (Wilson, 2014). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents over the last three decades. A not-so-surprising statistic given the increased consumption of sugar-laden beverages, highly processed food, and the change in standards of the school lunch program. The food industry has caused a significant rise in childhood obesity rates over the last 30 years.

Increasing consumption of sugary drinks is a major cause in the rise in childhood obesity, according to Harvard's School of Public Health. Beverage companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year in marketing their products, much of this aimed directly at children. Each year, youth see hundreds of television ads for sugar-containing drinks. In 2010, for example, preschoolers viewed an average of 213 ads for sugary drinks and energy drinks, while children and teens watched over 600 ads ("Sugary drinks," 2016). The size of an average beverage has more than tripled, from 6.5 ounces in the 1950's to 20 ounces. A typical 20-ounce soda contains 15-18 teaspoons of sugar and 240 calories ("Sugary drinks," 2016). These empty calories do not provide a feeling of satiety and provide zero nutritional value.

Unfortunately, soda is only one culprit. The market has been inundated by energy drinks, sports drinks, and fruit juice. These are marketed to be "healthier" options, providing nutritional benefits. A 12-ounce glass of orange juice contains 180 calories, the same as eating three chocolate chip cookies ("Sweet drinks," 2016). Sports drinks were created to replace fluid and electrolyte loss in athletes involved in vigorous activity. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, for the average child engaged in routine physical activity, the use of sports drinks in

place of water or in the school lunchroom is generally unnecessary – and stimulant-containing energy drinks have no place in the diets of children or adolescents (Schneider, 2011).

In addition to super-sized beverages, the food industry has created endless quick, convenient, and affordable options. The documentary “Fed Up” brings to light the threat fast food chains and the makers of processed foods pose to public health. The filmmakers say they are as large a threat as big tobacco was. The reason is for the increase in added sugars to foods marketed as “low fat” – currently 80% of processed foods – a statistic they prefer to keep hidden from consumers. The food industry lobbied Congress to prevent full disclosure of the amount of sugar on nutrition labels. It is added to “low fat” options to improve the taste, while offsetting any potential health benefit. Sugar is addictive – a recent study found that lab rats traded their cocaine addiction for a sugar addiction (Morgan, 2014).

In addition to marketing “low fat” options, makers of processed foods have become giants in the industry by making food affordable and convenient. NPR reports leaner cuts of meat, fresh produce, and milk is more expensive than the highly processed and sugary alternatives (Inskeep & Montagne, 2013). A good diet is vital for work, health care, and education. Elain Livas, of Project SHARE a food pantry says, “it’s hard to make good decisions when you’re hungry” (Fessler, 2010). Access to supermarkets or local farmer’s markets is also often a barrier to people on a fixed or low income. Fast-food chains or small grocers (i.e. gas stations, bodegas) are on nearly every street corner and allow people easy access to a quick, cheap – usually processed – option. The industry has created an efficient way to produce tons of food at little cost to the consumer, most of which is fast and convenient to prepare, if any prep is necessary. Consider the time it takes to whip up a box of mac ‘n cheese versus the time it takes to make it from scratch – or even the time it would take to make a sandwich (Inskeep &

Montagne, 2013). Compare then, the costs of each, and it's easy to see why consumers pick the packaged processed foods.

In 1972, a Las Vegas businessman introduced a new kind of school lunch program aimed at turning a profit for schools. Rather than well-rounded home-cooked meals, students were offered hamburgers, hotdogs, French fries, milkshakes, and soda – with pickles counting as a vegetable. The students came in droves for the new menu and the schools made money, but in 1978 a food critic finally noticed most children were not making healthy choices (Flam, 2013). The food industry has a stronghold on school lunches, much like the rest of the market. The vast majority of school lunch programs have been outsourced to industry giants that make their fortune producing mass amounts of processed foods. The Agriculture Department provides commodities to schools for fresh produce, chicken, and turkey. The food is free and some institutions prepare it on site, but more commonly, it is outsourced to processors to turn fresh, whole chicken into highly processed nuggets. The Center for Science in the Public Interest reported that “many schools continue to exceed the standards for fat, saturated fat and sodium” and cautioned that sending food for processing would result in a less nutritious product. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s 2008 study determined that by the time many healthier commodities reach students, “they have about the same nutritional value as junk foods” (Komisar, 2011).

In response to criticism, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) in 2010 which revised school lunch standards. The HHFKA aligned meals with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans by increasing quantities of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; establishing calorie ranges; and limiting trans fats and sodium. Although there has been a movement to improve the quality and nutrition of school lunches, there has been a decline in the

number of students receiving school lunch, especially those paying full price. This decline led to the House of Representatives providing waivers to schools with a loss of revenue to opt out of providing the healthier meals outlined by the HHFKA (Taveras, 2014). Children consume about half of their daily calories at school and for some children, school lunch may be their only real meal each day – which they only have twenty minutes to consume. Rather than exploring options with healthy fats and high protein, the new regulations have forced manufacturers to formulate options such as a whole grain doughnut. “By forbidding certain foods and coercively promoting others, some worry that the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act may perpetuate Americans’ uneasy, binge-prone relationship with food” (Murphy, 2015)

Most experts agree that healthy eating habits begin at an early age in the home. Schools can further foster healthy lifestyles by promoting physical activity and nutrition education. Unfortunately, the food industry has children under their sugary spell with visions of super-sized fries, sodas, and processed mystery meat. This stranglehold reaches beyond the children, to the very people who should be protecting them in their homes and schools, with promises of convenience and cost-savings. "One of the most sobering and tragic statistics is that this generation is expected to lead a shorter lifespan than their parents" (Soechtig, 2014). The food industry has grown exponentially over the last 30 years – and with it, so has childhood obesity rates.

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015, August 27). *Childhood obesity facts*. Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm>
- Fessler, P. (2010, July 20). *Eating nutritiously a struggle when money is scarce*. Retrieved from NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128621057>
- Flam, F. (2013, September 27). How childhood obesity became a crisis. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/postlive/how-childhood-obesity-became-a-crisis/2013/09/26/b2f87652-1708-11e3-804b-d3a1a3a18f2c_story.html
- Inskip, S. & Montagne, R. (2013, March 1). *Why processed food is cheaper than healthier options*. [interview]. Retrieved from NPR: <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/01/173217143/why-process-food-is-cheaper-than-healthier-options>
- Komisar, L. (2011, December 3). How The Food Industry Eats Your Kid's Lunch. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/04/opinion/sunday/school-lunches-and-the-food-industry.html>
- Morgan, D. (2014, May 8). *Documentary: "Fed Up" with rising childhood obesity*. Retrieved from CBS News: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/documentary-fed-up-with-rising-childhood-obesity/>
- Murphy, K. (2015, September 26). Why Students Hate School Lunches. *The New York Times*.

Schneider, M. B. &. (2011, June). Clinical Report–Sports Drinks and Energy Drinks for Children and Adolescents: Are They Appropriate? *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 127(6), 1182-1189.

Stephanie Soechtig, E. M. (Producer), & Soechtig, S. (Director). (2014). *Fed Up* [Motion Picture]. United States: The Weinstein Company.

Sugary drinks and obesity fact sheet. (2016). Retrieved from Harvard School of Public Health: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/sugary-drinks-fact-sheet/>

Sweet drinks and obesity (2015). Retrieved from UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital: https://www.ucsfbenioffchildrens.org/education/sweet_drinks_and_obesity/

Taveras, J. A. (2014). Preventing Progress against Childhood Obesity - The National School Lunch Program. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 1862-1865.

Wilson, J. (2014, July 21). *Girl loses 65 pounds in fight against childhood obesity*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/04/health/child-weight-loss-bond/>