

Jim Skinner: McDonald's Hurts Our Kids

Dear CEO Skinner:

CC:

Don Armstrong; Edward Baily; Blake Casper; Susan Chrismar; Richard Commer; Darula Foods; Brian & Russell Ellis; Leonard & Frank Ginnola; KaravatesManagement; James Lewis; Ron Loffon; Richard Lommen; Leo Lopez; Rita Mack; Colly McCoy; William McEssy; Jim McGarry; Napoli Group; Gary Oerther; John Orr; Randell Price; Scott & David Rardin; Scott Rodrick; Errol Service; Charles, Christopher & John Valluzzo

As health professionals engaged directly in the largest preventable health crisis facing this country, we ask that you stop marketing junk food to children.

The rates of sick children are staggering. Ballooning health care costs and an overburdened health care system make treatment more difficult than ever. And, we know that reducing junk food marketing can significantly improve the health of kids.

Our community is devoted to caring for sick children and preventing illness through public education. But, our efforts cannot compete with the hundreds of millions of dollars you spend each year directly marketing to kids.

Today, our private practices, pediatric clinics, and emergency rooms are filled with children suffering from conditions related to the food they eat. In the decades to come, one in three children will develop type 2 diabetes as a result of diets high in McDonald's-style junk food, according to the Centers for Disease Control. This generation may be the first in United States history to live shorter lives than their parents.

The rise of health conditions like diabetes and heart disease mirrors the growth of your business – growth driven in large part by children's marketing. Although the American Academy of Pediatrics deems such marketing "inherently deceptive to children under 8," you continue to use it as a vehicle to grow your enterprise.

As one marketing expert puts it, "Ronald captures kids' attention better than anyone else can." You use Ronald McDonald and other promotions to appeal to kids in environments that informed parents and health professionals can't constantly monitor – from schools to libraries to the internet. Today, your icon is as recognized as Santa Claus, and the McDonald's model of marketing is used by a range of abusive industries.

McDonald's and industry front groups have refused to address the dangerous toll that fast food and predatory marketing is taking on our kids. While acknowledging that fast food is unhealthy, you pin responsibility for the epidemic of diet related disease on a breakdown in parental responsibility.

As health professionals, we know that parents exercising responsibility for their children's diets and physical activity is vital. We also know – and the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity agrees – that no authoritative data indicates a breakdown in parental responsibility.

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Obesity and disease levels among kids are rising, even though parents continue to parent, and as researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health conclude, kids continue to exercise at rates similar to those of two decades ago. So what has changed?

What has changed is the food children eat and the amount of marketing they are bombarded with. Even when parents resist the “nag effect” cultivated by McDonald’s to access the \$40 - 50 billion in annual purchases that children under 12 control, advertising creates brand loyalties that persist into adulthood.

Advertising is at the heart of McDonald's business model, with annual expenditures reaching \$2 billion. Your marketing practices set the standard for competitors across industries.

We know the contributors to today’s epidemic are manifold and a broad societal response is required. But, marketing can no longer be ignored as a significant part of this massive problem.

We ask that you heed our concern and retire your marketing promotions for food high in salt, fat, sugar, and calories to children, whatever form they take – from Ronald McDonald to toy giveaways.

Our children and health care system will benefit from your leadership on this issue.

Signed:

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Walter Willett, MD, DrPH, Chair, Department of Nutrition; Fredrick John Stare Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition; Professor of Medicine, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, MA

And more than 550 other health professionals and institutions in all 50 states.