

Education and Health

April 3, 2017



Communiqué 04

Inspired by the Spirit, Women Respond to God's Call

**To: Provincial Chairpersons of Education and Health
National Executive (for information)**
From: Fran Lucas, National Chairperson of Education and Health

This communique was written by sub-committee chairperson of health and wellness Becky Kallal.

The kids are not alright

Recently, the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Canada released its 2017 Report on the Health of Canadians, entitled *The kids are not alright*. The report's subtitle "How the food and beverage industry is marketing our children and youth to death" really captures the theme and subject matter of this well-researched report.

Since 1979, childhood obesity levels have tripled, and today almost one third of Canadian children are overweight or obese. Obesity increases children's risk for heart disease and stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, depression and other health problems. The link between obesity and unhealthy diets among children and youth, including the types and amounts of foods consumed, has been clearly established.

Over the past 70 years, Canadian consumption of processed and ultra-processed foods has increased. They now account for 60% of the average family's food purchases, given that these energy dense, nutrient-poor processed foods and sugary drinks are often the most accessible and heavily marketed items available to consumers.

Dr. Tom Warshawski, chair of the Childhood Obesity Foundation, says, "It is unethical to teach vulnerable kids to consume foods high in fat, sugar and salt." Yet up to 90% of the food and beverages marketed on television are high in one or more of these three ingredients. On average, Canadian children watch about two hours of television each day, viewing four to five food and/or beverage advertisements per hour. Add in other screen time, and the total time jumps to approximately eight hours each day.

To get a sense of the impact of this marketing, Dr. Monique Potvin Kent, food and beverage marketing expert, reviewed advertising on the 10 most popular websites visited by Canadian 12 to 17 year olds over a one-year period in 2015 to 2016. She found that the teens viewed over 2.5 million food and beverage advertisements—over 90% of them for unhealthy, items

high in fat, sugar or salt. One of these top sites is used by teachers and students because it is a good educational math resource.

We are all subject to the effects of marketing. If it didn't work, advertisers would have given up long ago. But children and youth, who do not yet have fully developed powers of discernment and critical thinking skills, are especially susceptible. Geoff Craig of Heart & Stroke says, "Marketing works. The 'nag factor' does not come out of nowhere—it is driven by marketing messages. Marketers know that 90% of food and beverage purchases are driven by kids." Dr. Potvin Kent believes that legislation restricting the food and beverage industry from marketing directly to youth is an important step in protecting children and supporting parents who "face a tough battle to protect their children from marketing messages."

As evidence that legislation can work, the Quebec *Consumer Protection Act* of 1980, which banned advertising of all goods and services targeted at those under the age of 13, has shown through follow-up study to be associated with positive social-welfare impacts. Children in Quebec now have the lowest rate of obesity among 6 to 11 year olds and the highest rate of vegetable and fruit consumption.

According to the Health Canada website, "What we decide to buy can be influenced by other factors such as a constant stream of commercial messages and endorsements that trigger our most basic eating instincts, especially for sugary, salty and fatty foods. Kids are particularly vulnerable and must be offered the protection and support they need to make healthy food choices easier... Health Canada will restrict the commercial marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to kids." No specific timeline is offered.

Of course, eating a healthy, balanced diet is influenced by many factors such as price, access and knowledge—not just marketing. It's really only marketing that has a direct influence on children and youth. However, there is an achievable solution that the federal government has made a commitment to. Let's pay attention to how this unfolds and encourage members of parliament to press forward with and support this initiative.

To read the full report *The kids are not alright*, or for information on the research and data supporting the report or what members in your province/territory can do, go to the website <http://www.heartandstroke.ca/what-we-do/media-centre/report-on-health>.

Thanks to Kathryn Bourque, St. Paul Diocesan President, for her help with the research for this communique.



Fran Lucas
National Chairperson of Education and Health