

# Tackling obesity - watch out for undue corporate influence in schools

*“All too often the education process is entrusted to people who appear to have no understanding of industry and the path of progress...The provision of education is a market opportunity and should be treated as such”*

European Round Table of Industrialists, 1988

*“Artificially fed infants consume 30,000 more calories than breastfed infants by 8 months of age”*  
(equivalent to 120 Mars bars - 4 a week).

Human Lactation 1999

As the pressure is mounting on junk food companies to stop advertising to children, some are attempting to reestablish themselves as health food and ‘nutrition education’ companies. The UK Government’s Education and Inspections Bill contains proposals which encourage business sponsorship of schools. But there are many risks which have not been fully addressed. Companies who have an interest in selling products to children (or parents) have a dual motive for sponsoring educational materials. Any investment by them must show a return, either in the short or the long term. The materials present an even more complex problem than crude brand promotions because they blur the boundaries between advertising, marketing and education. They can also subtly distort the curriculum in favour of business interests while allowing companies to gain the trust of parents, children and teachers. Sponsorship is an effective way to divert attention from irresponsible marketing. It can also create pressures on teachers, effectively preventing them from expressing concerns or encouraging open debate about the activities of sponsors.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* calls on Governments to protect children from exploitation and the World Health Assembly Resolutions on Infant Feeding and Diet and Physical Activity contain safeguards against conflicts of interest. These Conventions and Resolutions should be used to ensure that schools are commercial free environments, to prevent the baby food industry from giving parent craft classes and junk food companies from providing core educational materials.



Seven of the 15 least healthy breakfast cereals in the Consumers Association’s report, *Cereal offenders* (March 04) were Nestle products. Below are some examples of how similar products are promoted, along with chocolate and sugary drinks, as the healthy option.

- **Russia:** Left: Nestlé’s ‘*Programme about Correct Nutrition - working notebook for school children in the 4th year of being at school*’ produced in collaboration with Ministry of Health is used in thousands of schools in Russia. But on Page 55 the mother tells the child that it is better to eat chocolate before an exam rather than a sandwich, because chocolate will help her manage the difficult exercises.

- Nestle’s CEO was quoted in the Telegraph 2.3.04 saying “Every morning I have a tablet of dark chocolate as my breakfast...I get everything I need for the day: magnesium, calcium, energy and so on. It is the perfect balance, and look at me. I do not think that I am obese.”

- At Codex Nutrition meetings, Nestle and other baby food companies lobbied to be allowed to add cocoa to cereal-based foods for infants.

## Reformulations, novel foods: how healthy or safe are they?

Some companies are now reformulating products, replacing the salt, sugar and fat with artificial ingredients created by novel processes which maintain the intense taste. Many of these ingredients and processes are controversial. Surely children have a right to a truly objective view?

- **Aspartame:** There is disagreement in the scientific community about the safety of *Aspartame*. The European Ramazzini Foundation (ERF) (an independent institution in Italy) says that *Aspartame* is a “multipotential carcinogenic agent” in rats. Coca Cola says it “is one of the most thoroughly studied ingredients used in food and drink and has consistently been found to be safe.”
- **Low-carb sweets:** “The low-carb Kit Kat, for instance, has a virtuous-sounding net-carb value of just 4g, while a standard two-finger bar has 13g. The trouble is, nobody seems to be concerned about the calorie content. The extra fat needed to bulk up low-carb confectionery virtually negates removing the “ordinary” sugars. With the Kit Kat, you save just 14 calories.” Amanda Ursell, *Sunday Times Style Magazine* 13.6.2004 [www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,8126-1145547,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,8126-1145547,00.html)
- **Walkers** is currently promoting crisps with 70% less saturated fat. But the overall fat content is still 30% and the number of calories remains the same. (Sunday Times Jan 29 2006)
- Nestlé promoted its *Refuel:Pod* vending machine as helping children “to make an informed and healthier choice” about food and “have a balanced lifestyle....Nestle Food Services [are driving] school vending into an exciting new area... built on six key principles essential to their growth, development and concentration.....” The 50 items listed in the *Standard Opening Order* were confectionary and snacks, such as *Rolo*, *Kit Kat*, *Milky Bar*, fruit jellies, pastilles, milk shakes and crisps. The exceptions were bottled water, juice, dried fruits, *Polo Sugar Free* mints and 2 low fat yoghurts. The advertisement described a ‘fruit pot’ as one portion of fruit. *Times Educational Supplement*. 24.6.04



- **Borneo:** (see right) Nestle is sponsoring the Inter-Schools Swimming Championship with T-shirts and Milo drinks. **Milo is 46% sugar.** (May 06 Borneo Bulletin Online)

- **Malaysia:** Nestlé is sponsoring 150 schools: “Year Four pupil Muhammd Irfan Muhamed liked it when his group created a jingle for *Koko Krunch* using the tune from the children’s nursery rhyme, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. They did the jingle in front of the other pupils.”

(New Straits Times 23 April 2006)



- **Jamaica:** (see right) Nestle is sponsoring school sports tracks “Through the brands *Klim* and *Milo*, we hope to make them (athletes) so healthy that it shows, and through *Milo*, as the tag line goes, ‘the food drink of future champions’, we hope that this will be a sterling event in the next month.” (Jamaica Observer, May 06)

Baby Milk Action’s education pack, *Seeing through the Spin*, *Public relations in the Global Economy* was created to help develop students’ critical faculties and to provide them with the tools they need to deconstruct the many subtle PR messages they receive: [www.babymilkaction.org/spin](http://www.babymilkaction.org/spin).

