

Guidelines debated to limit food ads for kids

by Jen Lazuta October 13, 2011

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Guidelines designed to encourage the promotion of healthy foods to children by the food and beverage industry, while limiting the advertisement of foods containing high levels of saturated fats, trans fats, added sugars and sodium, were debated at a hearing in Washington D.C., Wednesday.

“Childhood obesity now represents one of the most serious and costly health threats facing the United States,” David C. Vladeck, director of the Bureau of Consumer Protection of the Federal Trade Commission, said in a prepared statement before the House Energy and Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Health, and Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade. “Marketing can be an effective tool to encourage children to make more healthful choices.”

The Interagency Working Group, a committee created by Congress in 2009 to develop nutrition standards for foods marketed to children, in April proposed the guidelines aimed at benefiting kids, aged 2-11, and teens, aged 12-17. The committee includes representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Our commitment [is to find] the best balance between what is best for children’s health and what is workable for industry,” Vladick said.

Despite his assurances, there was a backlash against the agency’s guidelines.

“While this initiative was portrayed as a helping hand to parents – to reduce children’s exposure to advertising for foods with limited nutritional value – to many of us and our constituents, this appears to be a first step toward Uncle Sam planning our family meals,” said Health Subcommittee Chairman Fred Upton (R-Mich.) in his opening statement.

Jim Baughman, senior marketing counsel for Campbell’s Soup Co., also rejected the guidelines.

“The nutritional criteria in the IWG proposal are unrealistic, counterproductive, contrary to established nutrition policy as set forth in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010, and entirely fail to address obesity,” he said at the hearing.

Others, however, were more optimistic.

“The reason marketing has a negative effect on children’s diets is that the overwhelming majority of products marketed to children is of poor nutritional value,” said Margo Wootan, the

director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C., focusing on improving nutrition and food safety for Americans. “We enthusiastically support the IWG’s proposal to use a food-based approach to ensure that the foods marketed to children make a meaningful contribution to a healthful diet...This could be a positive step forward [in the fight against obesity].”

Shandel Kramer, of Fishers, Ind., mother of two young daughters, said she has mixed feelings about the hearing and the proposed guidelines.

“As a mom, I prefer my children don't see blatantly unhealthy food or drinks being advertised via Dora [the Explorer], princesses or other characters that they love. But as an American, I don't think this is something that should be regulated by the government.”

Kramer said that instead she tries to take responsibility for what her children do and don't view.

“I limit television and computer time,” she said. “When [my daughters] do watch TV it's usually on-demand or a DVD, and therefore no advertisements.”

In-store advertising, Kramer said, is a bit trickier to avoid, but that she doesn't agree with parents, or anyone else, who blames fast food, soft drink or snack food companies for their child's unhealthy habits.

Chicago dietician Christine M. Palumbo agreed, saying that parents should remember that it is parents themselves who are the most important and longest-lasting influence on their children's diets.

“No matter what kids see advertised to them,” she said, “what parents say and do will have a far greater influence on what their children know about diet and what they eat over the long term. Children aren't the ones buying heavily advertised foods under criticism; It's the parents.”

Palumbo acknowledged that kids are always going to be asking for snack foods. She said there will be a certain amount of whining, but that parents must know when it's appropriate to say yes and when to say no

Kramer said she often encounters situations such as this, and has learned when to pick her battles.

“When my oldest daughter says ‘Mommy, can we get princess gummies? Can we, can we?’ most of the time my answer is ‘No.’ She gets over it. Occasionally though, I will say yes. A little sugar or saturated fat once in a while is fine, as long as they're eating the good stuff too.”

This is a good strategy, said Palumbo, emphasizing that no diet can be 100 percent perfect.

“In the real world, there need to be indulgences,” she said. “As long as you eat well most of the time, fun foods are OK.”

As for regulating what should and shouldn't be marketed to children, Adam Becker, executive director of the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children, said his group supports the Interagency Working Group's guidelines, but recognizes that obesity is a complicated issue.

“There are passions on all sides,” Becker said in an interview Thursday morning. “But it's a great example of intergovernmental collaboration and I hope that something positive can come out of it.”

Palumbo added that when looking at marketing guidelines, it's important to remember that childhood obesity is multifactorial.

“We can't point our fingers at one contributor,” she said. “What we are eating and how much, and also the amount of activity kids get all matter. It's not just quick service restaurant or advertising on television.”

Following the hearing, Robert Post, deputy director of USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, in Alexandria, Va., said he thought the panels did a great job presenting their arguments.

“It was an engaging discussion and good recommendations came from it.”

Post said that while it's still clear the food market has influence over food choice and that limits on the advertising of unhealthy food in various media can contribute to the reduction of childhood obesity, it's also apparent that changes need to be made to the original proposal.

“We now need to simplify the guidelines and provide more practical and feasible nutritional recommendations,” he said.

The Interagency Working Group will use the input to revise the April proposal. Post expects the new document to be completed by the end of the year.