



Joannah & Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ADVANCING PUBLIC POLICY

Advancing Public Policy is an ongoing Lawson Centre series examining the wider impact of U of T Medicine's child nutrition research.

**In the Marketing
Crosshairs**

Children are Saturated in Unhealthy Food Messages

Overview

Parents often worry about the content their children encounter online, and how it will affect the health of their minds. Perhaps we need to pay more attention to the ads they're seeing online as well, especially those promoting unhealthy foods.

How many do you think they're exposed to in a year? Hundreds? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Keep going, says Prof. Mary L'Abbé, of the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Toronto. Canadian children view an estimated 25 million food and drink ads annually online — and 90% of those products are unhealthy.¹

That's only one way that young people are targeted. The ads and marketing in other media, as well as food and beverage packaging, don't serve children well. Prof. L'Abbé and her research group² are looking closely at food and beverage advertisements, and their potential impact on children's consumption choices and health.

What's the scope of the problem?

Much food and beverage marketing, not just that aimed at children, promotes unhealthy products. Yet children are especially vulnerable. Why? They typically lack the cognitive skills to identify basic advertisements. Continued exposure to the promotion of unhealthy foods also strengthens their preference for these products. Those choices are shaped by many forms of children's marketing, from fun-shaped foods, to interactive games on packaging and websites, to kid-friendly product names and characters.

With these cues coming from all corners, children's diets are filled with selections that are high in sodium, sugar and saturated fat. Prof. L'Abbé says it's no wonder that:

- one-third of Canadian children are overweight or obese;
- 70% don't meet the minimum daily requirement for fruits and vegetable; and
- one-quarter eat fast food daily.

What are U of T researchers learning?

Prof. L'Abbé's lab studied more than 45,000 foods and beverages from Canadian supermarket retailers,³ collected in 2010, 2013 and 2017. Together, these supermarkets comprised about 75% of the market share for grocery retail.

The research team looked at the recommended Daily Value (DV) of salt, sugar and fat. Given Health Canada's proposed healthy threshold of no more than 5% of the DV for these nutrients in any one food item for children, they found that only 16% of all products met this threshold and would therefore be allowed to be marketed to children under the proposed regulations.

Another study from Prof. L'Abbé's lab found that products with on-package marketing aimed at children were generally of lower nutritional quality (higher in fats, sugars or salt) than similar products without children's marketing. Even products that might appear like they're good for you, such as yogurt or granola bars, can be misleading.

"For many of the foods that we thought were healthy, the versions we market to kids are often the least healthy variety in the category," says Prof. L'Abbé.

How is the Lawson Centre advancing understanding from the lab to society?

The L'Abbé Lab — a key part of U of T's Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition — provides an evidence base to support sound public health nutrition policy. That's true in areas such as health claims on foods, front-of-pack labelling, children's marketing on foods, nutritional quality of packaged and restaurant foods, menu labelling, food-like natural health products, and more.

Research by Prof. L'Abbé, and her graduate students and trainees, has resulted in 50 publications in the last five years and garnered much media attention. An online salt calculator tool⁴ developed in her lab helps consumers assess their sodium intake. Among the entities to use Prof. L'Abbé's data: Health Canada, the Ontario government, Toronto Public Health, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, the World Health Organization and the food industry.

Prof. L'Abbé has shared her knowledge as Co-chair of the Canadian Trans Fat Task Force, head of the Trans Fat Monitoring Program and Chair of the Canadian Sodium Working Group. She has also served on several advisory committees for governments, health charities and the World Health Organization.

What can be done to make a difference?

Action is needed on several fronts. Canada already has a voluntary, industry-led program to limit marketing to children. Yet the Canadian Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CAI) has commitments from only 17 manufacturers and one restaurant chain. (There are almost 7,000 food and beverage manufacturers in Canada according to an industry association, and nearly 100 large restaurant chains.)

Prof. L'Abbé suggests that while some food companies have taken steps towards limiting marketing to children on their websites, voluntary industry commitments aren't sufficient.⁵

Her findings have bolstered the case for mandatory government regulations to protect children from the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages. If the CAI was mandatory and covered a broader range of advertising platforms, its uniform nutrition criteria would be relatively stringent and could effectively restrict children's marketing in Canada.⁶

The extent to which children are saturated in marketing, and the impact on their diets, makes it imperative to control the messages to this audience. Government has a role.



Prof. L'Abbé is heartened by the Child Health Protection Act (Bill S-228), which passed in the House of Commons in September 2018. The act imposes restrictions on the marketing of food and beverages high in sodium, sugar and saturated fat to children under age 13. It will likely take effect in 2021.

It's important, she says, that the Act defines marketing broadly. The restrictions will apply to broadcast, print, digital, product packaging and restaurant foods. The Act pertains to children 12 and under; Prof. L'Abbé says that such protections should go further ideally, as they're necessary for adolescents as well.

That addresses messages. But legislation around marketing doesn't automatically put nutritious foods in the stomachs of Canadian children every day. "What Canada is also sorely lacking compared to other countries is a government-mandated school food program," says Prof. L'Abbé. "Just as important as education should be a healthy environment in schools, and that includes healthy foods."

Taking the long view is critical. She says when it comes to public health programs, the attention and resources tend to go to acute outbreaks. You can't minimize that; people do get sick from food-borne illnesses. With unhealthy eating, however, the effects are seen years and decades down the road, in rising rates of diabetes, hypertension and obesity. "We spend a lot right away on emergencies, but not enough on prevention," she says.

That's why, in the menu of policy options, restrictions on marketing certain foods and beverages are so appealing. It can have a profound impact on forming healthier habits now, says Prof. L'Abbé, and on reducing health issues well into the future.

How can concerned citizens get engaged?

Health Canada's proposed regulations are awaiting final approval. To express support for restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children, speak to your MP. Or, better yet, contact the Minister of Health, the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor (canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/contact-us.html). The advocacy group Stop Marketing to Kids Coalition has also been instrumental in getting this issue on the government's agenda; visit stopmarketingtokids.ca to learn how to get involved.

In addition, Sen. Art Eggleton introduced a Senate motion in Summer 2018 to advocate for a national school nutrition program that would provide a daily nutritious meal to all students, and ensure appropriate safeguards for independent oversight of food purchasing, nutrition standards and governance. The Coalition for Healthy School Food is supporting this issue; learn more at healthyschoolfood.ca. ♦

1 <https://www.heartandstroke.ca/-/media/pdf-files/canada/2017-heart-month/heartandstroke-reportonhealth2017.ashx>

2 <http://labbelab.utoronto.ca>

3 Food Label Information Program, <http://labbelab.utoronto.ca/projects/the-canadian-food-supply>

4 <https://archive.projectbiglife.ca/sodium>

5 "The effectiveness of voluntary policies and commitments in restricting unhealthy food marketing to Canadian children on food company websites"; Vergeer, Vanderlee, Potvin Kent, Mulligan and L'Abbé; *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, October 2018.

6 "Assessment of the Canadian Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative's Uniform Nutrition Criteria for Restricting Children's Food and Beverage Marketing in Canada"; Mulligan, Labonté, Vergeer and L'Abbé; *Nutrients*, June 2018.



Prof. Mary L'Abbé is part of the Joannah & Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition, a network of researchers and educators affiliated with the University of Toronto. Together, they're working to improve child health and prevent obesity, malnutrition and chronic disease. Three departments in the Faculty of Medicine – Nutritional Sciences, Family & Community Medicine, and Paediatrics – lead the Lawson Centre. The goal is healthier children living longer through better nutrition, in Canada and around the world.