



Actually, we do need a strategy for obesity



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What if I told you there's a chronic health condition that affects one in four children in Australia, shortening their life expectancy and compromising their mental health as well as putting them at greater risk of social isolation? It's also preventable and is being fostered by the corporate sector, while the federal government sits on the sidelines.

Outraged? We should be. Overweight and obesity and poor diets are setting our kids up for a life potentially burdened by serious health problems, including type 2 diabetes, heart and kidney disease, stroke and some cancers.

We are justifiably concerned when companies use techniques that can entice kids to guzzle alcohol or place a bet on sporting competitions, but for some reason protecting kids from unhealthy food and drink marketing falls into the "parental responsibility" camp.

Children are extremely vulnerable to marketing, much more so than adults, and this is made all the more powerful when food and beverage giants use popular cartoon characters and free toys to lure children into wanting their energy-dense, processed, nutrient-poor products.

The same applies when unhealthy food brands cosy up with elite or local sport, sending the message to Australian children that junk food goes hand-in-hand with a healthy, active lifestyle.

Of course parents have an important role to play, but we are stacking the odds against them by allowing junk food marketing to saturate family life.

Companies spend millions of dollars driving demand for their products. Parents also have to play the difficult role of food detective to

determine if foods and drinks marketed as "healthy" are truly nutritious.

Sports drinks, muesli bars and even some baby foods are promoted as being healthy but in reality some are hiding as much sugar as lollies.

The need for a national obesity strategy in Australia is long overdue. We cannot sit back and simply watch

as our obesogenic environment helps dig an early grave for the next generation. No single intervention in isolation can be expected to have a substantial effect on overweight and obesity rates, but obesity must become a priority issue for all governments. The example set by NSW with its whole of government approach to addressing childhood obesity and a long-term commitment is critical to tackling the issue.

NSW Health has tasked itself with reducing overweight and obesity rates of children by five percentage points by 2025, using measures such as the Make Healthy Normal social marketing campaign, supporting GPs and health professionals to identify and refer children above a healthy weight, increasing access to sports by subsidising participation costs and

increasing healthy food and drinks in settings such as school canteens and hospitals. We can learn from the success of tobacco control strategies, including public education campaigns, restricting marketing and keeping prices high. These same levers can be used to tackle obesity and weight-related health problems.

Thanks to decades of effective tobacco control policy, smoking among Australians, and particularly our young people, is at an all-time low. Australia, justifiably, is regarded as a world leader in this field. It's time to harness these skills to the epidemic of excess weight and obesity among our children, and start standing up for their interests rather than the profits of junk food manufacturers.

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