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Parents Increasingly See Unhealthy Food Marketing and Easy Access to Junk Food as Obstacles to Raising Healthy Children

Parents' support grows for public policies that can help counter food marketing and junk food access and promote healthy eating habits among children in the media, schools and communities.

Hartford, Conn. – Eighty-five percent of parents surveyed about their views on food marketing to children agreed that companies should reduce advertising of unhealthy food to their kids, according to a new report from the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut.

Support for policies to promote healthy eating habits for their children in the media, schools and communities increased between 2012 and 2015 among parents surveyed for this study, with black and Hispanic parents significantly more likely to express support than white parents. The new report updates findings from a 2012 Rudd Center report with new data collected from 2012 to 2015. The report is available at <http://www.UConnRuddCenter.org/ParentAttitudes>.

“Most of the parents surveyed indicated they are willing to take action to improve food marketing to children,” said Jennifer Harris, Director of Marketing Initiatives for the UConn Rudd Center, and the study’s lead author. “Black and Hispanic parents in our survey were even more likely to believe that their children were impacted by unhealthy food marketing and said they were more willing to do something about it.”

Rudd Center researchers surveyed 3,608 parents with children between the ages of two and 17 to measure attitudes about food marketing and food industry self-regulation, and assess support for policies to promote healthy eating for their children.

The researchers used a cross-sectional sample of parents to compare responses by socio-demographic characteristics, including black, Hispanic and lower-income parents, and changes in responses from 2012 to 2015. Although the responses are not representative of the entire U.S. population, the findings highlight opportunities to address parents’ concerns about food marketing to their children.

From 2012 to 2015 there was an increase in the percentage of parents who agreed that food companies are improving the nutrition of products marketed to children and making positive changes to reduce childhood obesity, and that food companies had delivered on their pledges to promote only healthier choices in advertising to children.

However, the majority of parents surveyed also agreed that food companies do not act responsibly when they advertise to children and they make it difficult for parents to raise healthy children.

Moreover, two-thirds of parents surveyed agreed that food companies should limit unhealthy food advertising to children up to at least age 14. Current voluntary food industry self-regulatory pledges (made through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative) apply only to advertising directed to children up to age 11.

The report's other key findings include:

- On average, more than 60 percent of parents surveyed supported an array of policies to promote healthy eating habits for their children in the media, schools and communities.
- Moreover, the majority of parents indicated they would take a variety of actions to encourage companies to reduce unhealthy food marketing to children, including to stop purchasing unhealthy products advertised to children, talk to other parents about food marketing, and sign an online petition to encourage companies to reduce unhealthy food marketing.
- Black and Hispanic parents perceived many factors in the food environment to be greater obstacles to ensuring healthy eating habits for their children, compared with white non-Hispanic parents, including, unhealthy food advertising and other factors such as easy access to fast food and unhealthy food in schools.

The findings highlight numerous opportunities for policy makers, the public health community, and food and media companies to help support parents in their efforts to raise healthy children, according to the report. These findings also indicate that parents would participate in advocacy campaigns to demand improvements in food marketing to children, and that such actions would be most welcomed in communities of color, where children are also exposed to greater amounts of unhealthy food marketing.

"It was encouraging to see in our results that most parents are aware that unhealthy food and drinks were the categories advertised most often to their children," Dr. Harris said. "However, the results also show that parents are not aware of just how often children see advertising for these products, or about the newer ways that food

companies reach their kids, such as through social media and on mobile devices. These emerging challenges will have to be addressed in order to ensure a healthier food environment for children.”

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Report co-authors include Karen Haraghey, Yoon-Young Choi and Frances Fleming-Milici of the UConn Rudd Center.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.