

Survey on the parental exposure to marketing of formula milk and formula milk related products for infants and young children aged up to 36 months

Executive Summary



Department of Health

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1. Introduction

The Family Health Service of Department of Health (DH) commissioned the Nielson Company to conduct a cross-sectional face-to-face interview survey at its Maternal and Child Health Centres during October to December 2015. The purpose was to collect information on the parental exposure to marketing of formula milk and its related products (feeding bottles and teats) for infants and young children aged up to 36 months in Hong Kong with a view to assessing the local situation.

The survey covered the following areas:

1. Milk feeding practice of their infants and young children
2. Knowledge on the recommended duration of exclusive breastfeeding and continuation of breastfeeding after adding solid food
3. Seen or heard of advertisement or promotions of formula milk and its related products for infants and young children in Hong Kong
4. Participation in promotional activities or seminars on issues related to infants and young children organised by parties other than healthcare organisations
5. Exposure to educational information on breastfeeding and formula milk for infants and young children produced by manufacturers of formula milk
6. Contact by personnel from manufacturers or retailers of formula milk
7. Receive samples and promotional gifts produced by manufacturers of formula milk or its related products

2. Research Methodology

The survey was conducted at 10 Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs) of the (DH) from 12 October, 2015 to 6 December, 2015.

The target respondents of the survey were parents of children aged up to 36 months who received services at the MCHCs on the day of interview. The following persons were excluded from the survey:

1. Parents who did not usually reside in Hong Kong in the past 3 months;
2. Parents who could not understand Chinese/English; or
3. Children within the age range (4-36 months) but were not brought to the MCHCs by their parents (e.g. brought by grandparents or domestic helpers etc.).

Face-to-face interview, using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing approach (CAPI), was adopted in the survey. A trilingual questionnaire (Cantonese, Putonghua, English) with 35 questions was used.

The number of completed interviews was 559, achieving an overall response rate of 65%.

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3. Key Findings of the Survey

1. Milk feeding practice of infant and young children
 - For children aged 4-6 months, 25% were exclusively breastfed, 24% were on mixed feeding and 51% were on formula milk only.
 - The percentage of children who drank formula milk increased with age, with 80% of those aged 13 to 36 months drinking formula milk only.
 - Of those respondents who fed their children with formula milk, 98% were responsible for or involved in choosing and purchasing of formula milk.
2. Knowledge of respondents on the optimal duration of exclusive breastfeeding / breastfeeding after introducing complementary food as per WHO's recommendation
 - Around half (51%) of the respondents knew that babies should be exclusively breastfed for 6 months, while 55% of respondents said that babies should continue to be breastfed till 24 months or older, or as long as possible after the introduction of complementary food.
 - Significantly more respondents with university or above education level knew the WHO's recommendation, when compared with respondents having a lower education level.
3. Seen or heard of advertisements or promotions of formula milk and its related products for infants and young children in Hong Kong in the past 3 months
 - Majority (88%) of the respondents reported that they had seen or heard of advertisements or promotions for formula milk. Electronic media (including television, radio etc.), internet and product retail / point of sales were their major channels. More than half (62%) of these respondents perceived that the advertisement or promotions were marketing products for babies both aged 0-6 months and for those 6 months or older. Another 6% of respondents perceived that the advertisement or promotions were marketing products targeted for babies aged 0-6 months.
 - Around a quarter (23%) of respondents reported that they had seen or heard of advertisements or promotions for milk bottles or teats. Public transport and advertising boards were the major channels.
4. Participation in activities or parent seminars related to infants and young children organised by non-healthcare organisations
 - There were 30% of respondents who reported having participated in activities / seminars related to infants and young children organised by non-healthcare organisations. Over 70% of these activities were organised by manufacturers of formula milk.
 - About half (49%) of the activities / seminars participated were about the care of newborn babies, whereas others were related to prenatal or postnatal care (35%), food or nutrition (30%), and breastfeeding and formula milk feeding (28%).

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Executive Summary, continued

3. Key Findings of the Survey, continued

5. Exposure to educational information on breastfeeding and nutrition for infant and young children produced by manufacturers of formula milk
 - Most (68%) respondents had seen or received educational information related to breastfeeding, formula milk feeding and nutrition for infant and young children produced by manufacturers of formula milk.
 - The educational information was mainly obtained via mail (e.g. sent through mothers' clubs) (64%), internet (30%) and healthcare organisations (22%).
 - The topics were mainly about infant nutrition / diet (70%), followed by product information of the formula milk (46%) and breastfeeding (30%).
6. Contact by personnel of manufacturers or retailers of formula milk
 - Most (69%) respondents had been contacted by manufacturers or retailers mainly through phone calls (80%), email (55%) and mail (37%).
 - Their main purposes of contact were to provide discounts / gifts / samples (52%) and product information (52%) to the respondents.
7. Receive samples and promotional gifts produced by manufacturers of formula milk or its related products
 - Most (70%) respondents had received samples of formula milk, milk bottles, teats
 - Most (75%) respondents also had received promotional gifts (e.g. towels, bibs, environmental bags)
 - Samples or gifts were usually received through mail, distributed at 'Baby Expo' or other exhibitions, and via healthcare facilities.

4. Discussion

This study showed that about half of the respondents were familiar with WHO's recommendation on the optimal duration of breastfeeding. Further strengthening of parental education to promote the optimal infant and young child feeding practices is warranted.

Majority of the respondents had seen or heard of advertisements or promotion of formula milk for infants and young children through a variety of mass media channels. In addition to mass media advertisement, most respondents reported exposure to formula milk promotional activities through various means and format, including participation in seminars and activities, receiving educational information, contact by personnel from manufacturer/retailers, and receiving samples and promotional gifts.

The findings of this study reflected the ubiquitous marketing strategies of formula milk manufacturers in Hong Kong. To enable parents to make informed decisions on feeding based on correct and unbiased information, guidance for relevant traders on the marketing practice of formula milk and its related products for infant and young children should be considered.