



Protecting Children's Well-being – Say “NO” to Marketing of Formula Milk



Products in Pre-primary Institutions

Current Feeding Problems among Hong Kong's Young Children

Healthy diet of young children not only impacts their current health, but also lays the foundation for their future health as adults. Nonetheless, a recent survey conducted by the Department of Health showed that many of our preschoolers were eating an unbalanced diet, characterized by overconsumption of formula milk and inadequate intake of fruits and vegetables. The survey also revealed widespread parental myths, such as “milk is indispensable for the growth and development of a child” and “Follow-up formulae are added with nutrients that promote children's brain development, which cannot be found in other foods”.¹ The unbalanced dietary patterns of our children and parental myths on milk intake could have been shaped insidiously by the pervasive marketing activities of formula milk companies.

Increasing Direct Promotion of Formula Milk Products to Young Children

The marketing of formula milk in Hong Kong is remarkably aggressive as evidenced by their enormous and increasing investments on advertising their products through the traditional and new media. Recently, we observed that companies were using pre-primary institutions as a platform to promote their products directly to young children, their teachers and parents. They offered the pre-primary institutions a basket of “educational and informational” resources and/or activities such as health talks on healthy eating and child development, etc. These resources and activities are blatantly promotional in nature, e.g. showing the image of products; presenting brand mascots or characters; distributing product samples and souvenirs with company logo or trademark; etc., aiming to target this captive audience.

**Follow-up formulae (e.g. no. 4 formula) are marketed for young children despite authorities opined that they are not necessary from the nutrition or health point of view.² A scientific report of the European Food Safety Agency released in October, 2013 reiterated that the use of follow-up formulae “does not bring additional value to a balanced diet in meeting the nutritional requirements of young children...it is no more effective in providing nutrients than other foods that constitute the normal diet of young children”³.*

¹ Department of Health & the Chinese University of Hong Kong. *A Survey of Infant and Young Child Feeding in Hong Kong*. 2012

² World Health Assembly resolution 39.28 [1986] states that the “practice of providing infants with follow up milks is not necessary”.

³ Scientific Opinion on nutrient requirements and dietary intakes of infants and young children in the European Union, European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), Oct 2013. Link <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/3408.htm>



Advertising or Promotion in Pre-primary Institutions Influences Parents' and Children's Choices of Food


Children are vulnerable to influences of direct or indirect advertising and commercial promotional activities. Ample evidence has shown that food promotion influences children's food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns.⁴ When marketing occurs in a school setting, the products or messages being promoted are likely to gain an implied approval or endorsement from the school authority. Further, this effect would act synergistically with other marketing activities such as television advertising, resulting in an overwhelming influence on children's behaviour.

Healthy Eating in Young Children: the proper role of milk

- ✧ *Young children rely on a balanced diet to meet their nutritional needs for optimal growth and development as well as physical activities.*
- ✧ *Milk is a convenient source of calcium and other nutrients. However, if a child drinks too much milk, this would displace his appetite for other nutritious foods and make healthy eating habits difficult to form.*
- ✧ *As a part of the diet that includes a variety of foods, 360 to 480 ml milk a day is sufficient to meet the calcium needs of children aged 1 to 5 years. If children consume other calcium-rich foods such as tofu, calcium fortified soy milk, or dark green leafy vegetables, the amount of milk required would be less.*
- ✧ *Children aged 2 years or above can take calcium fortified soy milk or low fat milk. Children above 5 years should preferably take skimmed milk.*

The Role of Pre-primary institution: Protecting the Health of Young Children—Say “No” to Marketing Activities of Formula Milk Companies

It is the ethical responsibility and unique role of the pre-primary institution to support children under their care to establish healthy dietary habits and protect them from undue commercial influences. Pre-primary institutions should not allow any commercial activities to take place in their premises, which include but not limited to the conduct of health talks and the dissemination of free samples, gifts and information materials to children and parents. They should also decline companies' offer of gifts, donations or sponsorships, in the name of assisting the school to improve learning facilities or environment. Pre-primary institutions are highly encouraged to make use of health education materials provided by credible sources, such as the Department of Health or other professional organisations.

 **Family Health Service**
Website: www.fhs.gov.hk
24-hour Information Hotline: 2112 9900

⁴ WHO: *The Extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children* (December 2008)

(March 2015)

