

Less Screen Time, Leaner Kids

Breaking the TV-junk food link

A \$3 BAG OF SPINACH may hardly seem revolutionary—unless SpongeBob SquarePants grins from the package. After all, kid-friendly icons are better known for hawking sugary snacks and processed foods. But with recent studies shedding new light on the relationship between television and the soaring rate of childhood obesity, a gap-toothed sponge promoting leafy greens signals a welcome change. Additional efforts by educators, public health experts and even insurers give more reason for hope.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, American schoolchildren spend more than 1,000 hours watching TV each year—more than they do in the classroom. And those hours have taken their toll: according to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the independent scientific advisory board on the nation's health, 31 percent of American children are obese or at risk for becoming so. These rates have more than tripled since the 1960s. Whereas the relationship between TV viewing and obesity was once thought to be anecdotal, recent research reveals that TV is a critical contributing factor to the problem. Last year, a 15-year study published

in the *International Journal of Obesity* concluded that the amount of time kids spend watching television is a powerful predictor of later obesity, rivaling diet and physical-activity levels in importance.

What they're watching

That television viewing is sedentary is only one part of the problem; advertising is another. Ads for high-sugar, low-nutrient foods and beverages dominate the commercials that 6- to 11-year-olds watch most, says Kristen Harrison, assistant professor of speech communication at the University of Illinois. "If kids eat the diet advertised," she says, "one-third of their daily calories will come from added sugars—and their fiber, calcium and iron needs will go unmet. We're dealing with a broad public health issue here."

The IOM agreed, releasing a comprehensive, highly critical report last December on food marketing to children. It advocates a multipronged ap-

proach to curbing junk-food advertising to kids, recommending, for one, that the government provide incentives for the food and beverage industry to develop and promote healthier foods. That's just the first step. Mary Story, professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota and an IOM committee member, adds, "We then have to make parents want to buy these foods and kids want to eat them."

Who's reacting

Enter companies like Boskovich Farms, producers of SpongeBob Spinach. Vice President of Sales and Marketing Don Hobson hopes SpongeBob's face will help his product appeal as much to children as to their parents. "I got the idea of using SpongeBob from my own kids," he says. Other companies are banking on the same idea, with Dora the Explorer showing up on peeled carrots from Grimmway Farms and

April 24-30, 2006 is national TV-Turnoff Week (details at www.tvturnoff.org). Spread the word.

Elmo promoting Earth's Best organic cereal. Even food giant Kraft announced it will no longer advertise Oreos, regular Kool-Aid and other nutritionally challenged products during kids' programs.

Educators are pitching in too. Jean Wiecha of the Harvard School of Public Health co-created a middle-school curriculum called Planet Health that teaches nutrition principles to kids and emphasizes the twin virtues of physical activity and reduced TV time. The program, funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts, is taught in most Boston public middle schools and in a total of 120 public middle schools statewide. One study showed that after participating in Planet Health, kids watched less television—and that among girls, obesity rates declined and fruit and vegetable intake increased. "Our curriculum doesn't tell kids what to do," says Wiecha. "It gives them tools to make healthier choices."

Planet Health teacher Christine Holmes of Mildred Avenue Middle School in Mattapan, Massachusetts, takes some of her most fitness-challenged kids to the gym after school. "We do kickboxing, spinning. They love it. One of the kids had never eaten an apple before this program."

—Cheryl Sternman Rule

