



Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

May 2008

Young Media Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. This submission has been prepared for Young Media Australia by Barbara Biggins OAM (Hon CEO) and Pamela Wright (Development Officer) on behalf of the Board of the Australian Council on Children and the Media (trading as Young Media Australia (YMA)). For further information, please contact Barbara Biggins at above address.

Note: all resources referred to in this submission have been posted in hard copy.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Young Media Australia (YMA) is the trading name of the Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM). The ACCM is a not-for-profit national community organisation structured as a company limited by guarantee. The ACCM has a national Board of Directors representing the states and territories of Australia, and has a national membership of organisations and individuals who support the aims of the organisation, viz to stimulate and maintain public interest in the provision of suitable films and television programs for children.
2. The ACCM has a comprehensive organisational membership which includes ECA (Early Childhood Australia (formerly AECA Australian Early Childhood Association)), ACSSO (Australian Council of State Schools Organisations), AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia), AEU (Australian Education Union), SAPPA (South Australian Primary Principals Association), Federation of NSW P&C (Parents & Citizens), and the Mothers' Union in Australia. Our members have a special interest and/ or expertise in media issues and children.
3. Young Media Australia's mission is to promote a quality media environment for Australian children and to raise community awareness of children's needs in relation to the media.
4. YMA's core activities include the collection of research and information about the impact of media on children's development, and advocacy for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media.
5. Young Media Australia's core services include:
 - a 24/7 freecall helpline 1800 700 357,
 - a website www.youngmedia.org.au containing a wealth of media-related information (attracting over 1000 visits per day),
 - a popular child-friendly movie review service (*Know before you go*),
 - the development of parent media awareness materials, and
 - making submissions, and participating in media interviews, related to media regulation.

B. THE BASIS FOR YMA'S SUBMISSION

Young Media Australia bases its submission on the following principles and knowledge base:

1. *The International Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 17*, viz

"Parties recognise the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of Article 13 and 18."

Article 13, paraphrased, supports the rights of children to seek and receive information and ideas of all kinds, subject to restrictions to protect public health.

Article 18, paraphrased, supports parents in their primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their children, but requires that institutions support parents in this role.

2. *Objectives b), h), i) and j) from the Broadcasting Services Act, s 3*

(b) to provide a regulatory environment that will facilitate the development of a broadcasting industry in Australia that is efficient, competitive and responsive to audience needs; and ...

(h) to encourage providers of broadcasting services to respect community standards in the provision of program material; and

(i) to encourage the provision of means for addressing complaints about broadcasting services; and

(j) to ensure that providers of broadcasting services place a high priority on the protection of children from exposure to program material which may be harmful to them ...

3. *The Policy Guidelines on Children's Television developed by the Australian Council for Children and the Media.*

4. *YMA's ongoing collection and review of the research literature*

In the preparation of this submission, YMA has reviewed the research literature as it relates to the impact of food advertising on children. This is an ongoing project for YMA.

5. *YMA's ongoing involvement in Standards and Codes as they impact on children*

In the preparation of this submission, YMA has relied on feedback from the community, YMA's member groups, formal surveys of parent opinion, and its experience and active involvement in the use and maintenance of children's TV standards, and the Commercial Television Industry, and AANA *Codes of Practice*.

C. SUMMARY COMMENTS

Young Media Australia commends the Committee for investigating these issues. They are of concern to Young Media Australia, its members, and the wider parent community.

YMA has had an ongoing involvement in the field of food advertising directed to children, and in regard to the food advertising to which many children are exposed. YMA has much concern about the role that this advertising plays in influencing children's eating preferences, and the difficulties this causes for parents who are trying to encourage their children to eat healthily.

YMA is a member of the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children and supports its submission to this Inquiry. That submission points to the strong evidence of advertising's influence on children's eating habits, and which provides the strong base on which YMA has built projects designed to assist parents to deal with this adverse influence.

D. DETAILED COMMENT ON TERMS OF REFERENCE

Research shows that frequent exposure to TV advertising is influential in encouraging young children's preferences for fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods, and setting up risk factors for the development of obesity and overweight.

Young Media Australia's (YMA) *Through Thick or Thin* projects, conducted between 2005 and 2008 aimed to develop interventions and strategies design to reduce young children's exposure to food advertising.

Research supporting the projects

While many, often costly, interventions have been developed to tackle the growing problem of childhood obesity in many developed countries of the world, a large proportion produce only meagre results.

This is the conclusion drawn in two research reviews of obesity prevention interventions (Boon and Clydesdale (2005), and Doak et al (2006)). It is noteworthy that both reviews find that interventions based around TV usage have been more effective than most.

Some interventions currently being applied in Australia take the approach of encouraging children to watch less TV and to be more active. (Australia. Dept of Health 2005) However, strong support for an approach that targets the content of children's TV viewing is found in, for example, Borzekowski (2003), Hastings (2003) and Kaiser Family Foundation (2004). They found that childhood food preferences are influenced by television advertising. Frequent exposure to TV advertising has been identified as influential in encouraging young children's preferences for fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods, and setting up risk factors for the development of obesity and overweight.

Further, the Kaiser Family Foundation review (2004) found that “contrary to popular assumptions, most research reviewed ... does not find that children’s media use displaces more vigorous physical activities The research indicates that there may be other factors related to children’s media use that are contributing to weight gain. In particular, children’s exposure to billions of dollars worth of food advertising and marketing in the media may be a key mechanism through which media contributes to childhood obesity.”

Australian programs aimed at reducing children’s exposure to food advertising (as urged by Borzekowski, Linn, Kaiser Family Foundation) are few in number. Further, there has been little government support for a ban on food advertising in Australia to date.

Our projects

The first stage of *Through Thick or Thin* developed one simple intervention based on encouraging young children to watch non-commercial media. This intervention is now more commonly tagged by its slogan *Keep your children out of the firing line*. This message was not a difficult one for parents to implement, and had other benefits for the child audience as well.

The second stage, *Through Thick or Thin 2: strategies to reduce exposure to television food advertising* used information that had been gathered during the first stage of the project to develop a resource package entitled *Healthy Viewing for Healthy Eating*. The package which includes a DVD, a booklet and a Parent Information Session aimed to further motivate and encourage parents of under sevens to reduce their children’s exposure to television food advertising.

YMA determined that the interventions developed by both stages of the project should wherever possible be delivered within a health care setting or via children’s health/education/care professionals as these would be trusted sources of information for parents.

Brief Project Descriptions

Thick or Thin 1

Parents of young children were chosen as the subject of the project, as children’s food preferences are often established at an early age. The *Keep your children out of the firing line* intervention, that is to encourage young children to watch non-commercial media was not a difficult one for parents to implement, and had other benefits for the child audience as well.

YMA determined that the intervention should wherever possible be delivered within a health care setting or via children’s health/education/care professionals as these would be trusted sources of information for parents. A brochure, three Fact Sheets, a five minute infomercial and 60 second commercial were developed to reach parents with these messages.

An additional stage of the first project included the gathering of data regarding attitudes to the issues around childhood obesity and food advertising, and about the home media environment, via a national survey questionnaire (900 respondents, who

were parents of 3-5yr old children). One important reason for running the survey was to test some of YMA's assumptions about target audiences and strategies.

Thick or Thin 2

Through Thick or Thin 2: strategies to reduce exposure to television food advertising used information that had been gathered during YMA's 2005 *Through Thick or Thin* project to develop a resource package entitled *Healthy Viewing for Healthy Eating*. The package which includes a DVD, a booklet and a Parent Information Session aims to motivate and encourage parents of under sevens to reduce their children's exposure to television food advertising.

Three strategies supporting this resource were trialled in three States: South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. The strategies were (a) posting out the booklet only, (b) posting out the DVD and booklet together and (c) giving out the DVD and booklet in the context of the Parent Information Session. The DVD and booklet are being promoted primarily through presentations to health professionals, and articles in professional journals. Community child health agencies are being encouraged to conduct the Parent Information Session with parents, to encourage them to reduce their children's exposure to television food advertising.

Resources

The following resources were developed during 2005–2008, by both projects.

Thick or Thin 1

Parent brochure

50,000 copies of the *Keep your children out of the firing line* were printed and distributed through (a) GPs participating in the Good Health TV service in June 2005, and (b) child health nurse networks nationally in May 2006

A reprint of the brochure was necessary a year later, and funding from the SA Department of Health in July 2006 enabled us to print a further 20,000.

The *Keep your children out of the firing line* brochure is available as a downloadable pdf from the YMA website

Three Fact Sheets

A series of three *Keep your children out of the firing line* Fact Sheets were produced:

- *Television food advertising and childhood obesity / overweight*
- *Body image problems, eating disorders and media messages, and*
- *Strategies for parents to counter television food advertising*

These Fact Sheets are primarily written for health professionals and included extensive reference lists. All three Fact Sheets are available as downloadable pdfs from YMA website

Infomercial

A five minute segment in which Dr Rosemary Stanton is interviewed on behalf of YMA by Dr Ross Symons was produced and played on Good Health TV (in doctor's waiting rooms) in June and July 2005

Commercial

A sixty second commercial in which Benita Collings, ex- Play School presenter, outlines the main points about television food advertising and childhood obesity / overweight was played on Good Health TV in the month of September 2005.

Thick or Thin Two

The following resources comprise the *Healthy Viewing for Healthy Eating* Resource Package:

DVD—Healthy Viewing for Healthy Eating

A discussion starter featuring three mothers discussing real dilemmas they encounter with their children and eating preferences

Booklet—Healthy Viewing for Healthy Eating

A summary of important information about the issue in short grabs presented in visually appealing style

Parent Information Session

Designed to be used by professionals who work with groups of parents in conjunction with the DVD and booklet.

All components of the package aim to motivate and encourage parents of under sevens to reduce their children's exposure to television food advertising. The DVD and the booklet are flexibly designed such that they can be used together as a single package, as separate stand-alone components or in conjunction with the Parent Information Session.

Parent surveys

Thick or Thin 1

The first project gathered data regarding attitudes to the issues around childhood obesity and food advertising, and about the home media environment, via a national survey questionnaire of parents of 3-5yr old children. An important reason for running the survey was to test some of YMA's assumptions about target audiences and strategies.

The Parent Survey was conducted through three avenues:

- Children's, Youth and Women's Health Service (CYWHS), South Australia. 1200 surveys were handed out by nurses conducting 4 year old kindy screening during November and December 2005.
- ABC Developmental Learning Centres. Surveys were sent electronically to 644 child care centres across Australia.
- Online. The survey was available from the YMA website from November 2005 to February 2006.

Over 900 responses were received in all. Findings are included in the report *Television food advertising: Parent Survey Analysis Full report Sep 06* (Hard copy in post), and provide support that the basic intervention is valid. The survey has given

us evidence for other strategies that should be successful in assisting parents with reducing exposure to television food ads, as part of the second stage.

Thick or Thin Two

Three strategies were trialled with 92 parents, using various combinations of the Resource Package components:

- Posting out the short booklet (without the DVD)
- Posting the *Healthy Viewing for Healthy Eating* DVD, accompanied by the same booklet as above)
- Conducting a short information session for parents, following which the DVD and booklet were given to participants.

As indicated in the (posted) report *Resource Package to support parents in reducing exposure to food ads: Overall Effectiveness and Relative effectiveness of three components April 2008*, all of the above components were found to be effective in influencing some aspects of parents' attitudes and practices around their children's exposure to television food advertising.

Of particular interest was a shift, most noticeably in the group of parents who were posted the DVD and accompanying booklet, from watching a majority of commercial TV on Saturday mornings, to watching videos and DVDs. This is of considerable significance, given the absence of ABC TV for kids on Saturday mornings, and the consequent greater exposure of children to food ads on programs shown on commercial stations at this time.

As anticipated, the most effective delivery strategy appears to be a combination of all three components, that is a Parent Information Session at which participants are given a copy of the DVD and booklet package.

Recommendations

Arising from YMA's work with the Thick or Thin projects a number of recommendations are listed below, and deserve careful consideration and support.

These recommendations are:

1. Encourage parents to take charge of preschool children's TV choices at all times.
2. Mothers are the appropriate targets for messages about young children's TV choices.
3. Encourage parents to keep TV sets in "public spaces"
4. Encourage mothers to choose non commercial media in early morning time slots.
5. Encourage parents to have a supply of alternative media at those times when the ABC has no suitable programming for preschool children

6. Suggest that Pay TV (eg Nick Junior which has no food ads) is an alternative (acknowledging the significant cost of same)
7. Encourage the use of alternative media rather than commercial stations in late afternoons and evenings, and on early mornings at weekends.
8. Provide mothers with more information about the inability of preschool children to deal with advertising, and that children under 7 do not understand selling intent
9. YMA's basic intervention is simple, easy to adopt, and warrants further promotion
10. Review recent research about the relationship between eating in front of TV, hours at TV set, and obesity, for more incentives for parents to discourage eating while watching TV.
11. Consider an approach to Government and food companies about the placement of TV characters on food packaging.
12. A component of the delivery of a next stage of this project should be to provide information to parents about the ways in which TV advertising has influenced their own food "knowledge" and choices.
13. The right and expectation of parents that they are the ones who should have the say about what their children eat must be respected, while at the same time suggesting that they will have an easier task in doing that if their children are "kept out of the firing line."

Conclusion

YMA's *Through Thick or Thin* projects have had the desired impact in that it has raised awareness amongst many organisations, professionals and individuals that food advertising itself has an impact on children's food choices, and has resulted in parents being more willing to take action to avoid food advertising.

The *Through Thick or Thin* interventions developed by YMA during 2005–2008, with funding support, will continue to be promoted to the wider community. They now form part of the suite of resources offered by YMA as a one stop shop for parents and professionals in all aspects of children and the media.

The wide reach of the projects, their associations with child health professional networks, and the demonstrably effective supporting materials lead us to believe that we have made an effective impact on the problem we have been seeking to address.



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APPENDIX 1 : List of resources produced by these projects is a separate e-file.