

# *Young Media Australia*

*Television Food Advertising:  
Parent Survey Analysis  
Full Report September 2006*

Trading name of

*Australian Council on Children and the Media*

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# Television Food Advertising and Childhood Obesity / Overweight Parent Survey Analysis Final Report September 2006

## Executive Summary

In 2005–2006, Young Media Australia (YMA), funded by the Telstra Foundation, developed one simple intervention which it believed would contribute to reducing the growing problems of childhood obesity and overweight. YMA urged parents to *Keep their children out of the firing line* by reducing young children's exposure to commercial media, and recommended instead the use of non-commercial media such as the ABC or videos / DVDs.

In December 2005–January 2006, YMA conducted a national survey (with responses from over 900 parents of preschoolers), to test some of its assumptions regarding this intervention. The survey gathered data about preschoolers' home media environment, including how much TV was being watched by the preschooler, and who controls the choices made at different times of the day. It also surveyed parents' perceptions of the issues around obesity and television, and whether they perceived that TV advertising had influenced their children's purchase demands.

One of the key findings was that parents of preschool children want advertising of unhealthy foods to their children to stop, and governments to introduce more effective regulation. Another finding was that while Mums decide what their preschoolers can watch most of the time, preschoolers themselves are second most likely to do so, and on Saturday mornings close to 30% of preschoolers are in control of the remote.

The survey found that many parents used the ABC as a source of suitable programming for their preschool children, and were willing to use it, or videos or DVDs as an alternative to commercial TV. Most preschoolers live in homes with at least 2 TV sets.

The report concludes with thirteen recommendations for consideration by government and health promotion professionals. Amongst these recommendations are that parents (with some emphasis on mothers as the principal controllers of the remote) should actively monitor their preschoolers' TV choices. Keeping the TV set out of children's bedrooms is a very useful strategy. The use of non commercial media is to be encouraged, and parents' awareness, about the inability of preschool children to deal with advertising and to understand selling intent, should be raised.

## Acknowledgements

Young Media Australia (YMA) gratefully acknowledges the funding of the Telstra Foundation which enabled it to conduct the *Keep your children out of the firing line* project. The SA Department of Health provided support which enabled the detailed data analysis, publication of the final report and recommendations.

YMA also thanks the following organisations and individuals for their assistance in the development, distribution and analysis of the survey: SA Children's Youth and Women's Health Service (CYWHS), ABC Early learning Centres, Dr R. Mubarak Ali from Flinders University and Tim Kupke of University of South Australia.

# Television Food Advertising and Childhood Obesity / Overweight Parent Survey Analysis Final Report September 2006

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Research shows that frequent exposure to TV advertising is influential in encouraging young children's preferences for fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods, and in setting up risk factors for the development of obesity and overweight. In December 2004, Young Media Australia (YMA) received funding from the Telstra Foundation to develop interventions and strategies designed to reduce young children's exposure to food advertising. The project was entitled *Through Thick or Thin: moderating the impact of food advertising on children's obesity levels and body image* and aimed to raise parents' awareness of the impact of television food advertising on children's obesity and overweight.

Parents of preschool aged children were chosen as the subject of the project, as children's food preferences are often established at an early age. 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.

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. The following strategies were used to deliver the message:

- a brochure "Keep your children out of the firing line" delivered to parents in a healthcare/education setting
- a five minute segment in which Dr Rosemary Stanton is interviewed on behalf of YMA, played on Good Health TV in June and July 2005
- a 60 second commercial screened on Good Health TV in September 2005

### 1.2. Parent Survey

An additional key element of the project was a national survey of parents of 3–5 year old children. The results of this survey are shown in the following sections of this report. This survey aimed to gather data regarding the home media environment. For example, how many

TV sets were in homes, how much TV was being watched by the preschooler, and who controlled the choices made at different times of the day. It also surveyed parents' perceptions of the issues around obesity and television, and whether they perceived that TV advertising had influenced their children's purchase demands.

One important reason for running the survey was to test some of YMA's assumptions regarding (a) the choice of intervention to minimise the impact of television food advertising, (b) the target group for the intervention, and (c) the strategies used to deliver the intervention.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Survey design

The survey form was developed in consultation with researchers at South Australia's Children Youth and Women's Health Service (CYWHS), and an experienced evaluator at Flinders University. It was piloted at a number of child care centres and new parent groups before producing the final copy (see Appendix B).

### 2.2. Sampling

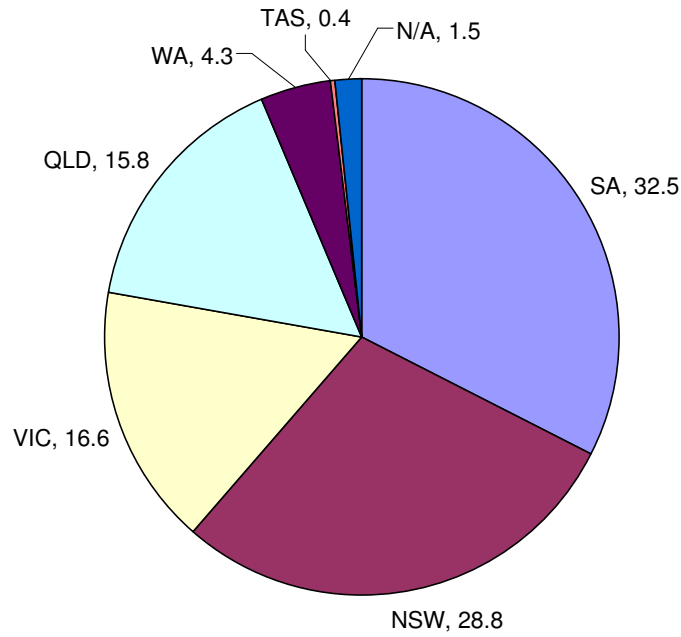
The survey forms were distributed to parents of 3–5 yr old children via three avenues:

- **CYWHS nurses in South Australia.** CYWHS nurses distributed approximately 1200 copies of the questionnaire as they conducted their kindy screening programme, a programme through which CYWHS nurses visit kindergartens across South Australia, and conduct routine health checks of children prior to school entry. Parents whose children were included in the kindy screening programme for a three week period in November–December 2005 were asked if they would be interested in participating in the survey, were given an information sheet describing the project and the survey process (see Appendix A) and asked to return the survey form directly to YMA in a Reply Paid Envelope provided. The number of survey responses received from this source was 235.
- A major **national child care centre chain.** The survey form was sent electronically to 644 child care centres across Australia, with an information sheet (see Appendix A), so it is not possible to ascertain actual numbers distributed. The number of survey responses received from this source was 569.
- **Online.** The same survey form was available in two ways from the YMA Website (a) for completion online, and (b) available as downloadable .pdf file. The number of survey responses received from this source was 106, including 72 from the online questionnaire.

The total number of surveys returned in time for processing was 910.

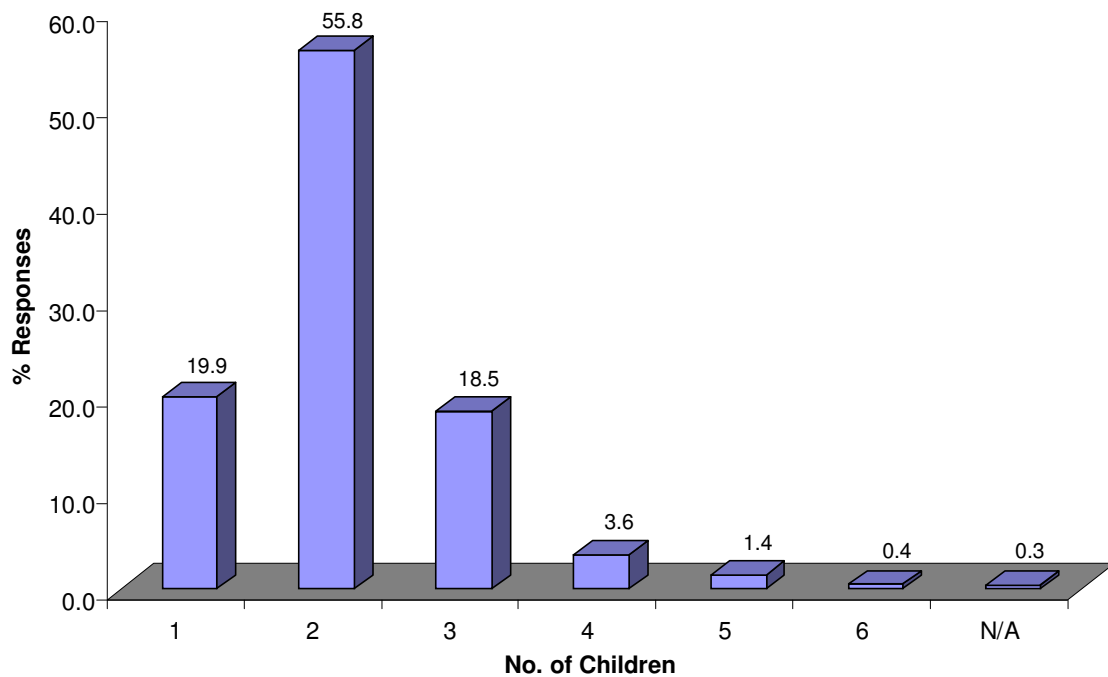
### 2.3. Subjects

Surveys were only distributed to a family where there was a child aged 3 to 5 years living with the family for at least half the time. All other families were excluded from the survey. Data was collected from all six states in Australia from a total of 910 families. Figure 2.1 below shows the percentage of responses from each state. N/A refers to those that did not indicate their state.



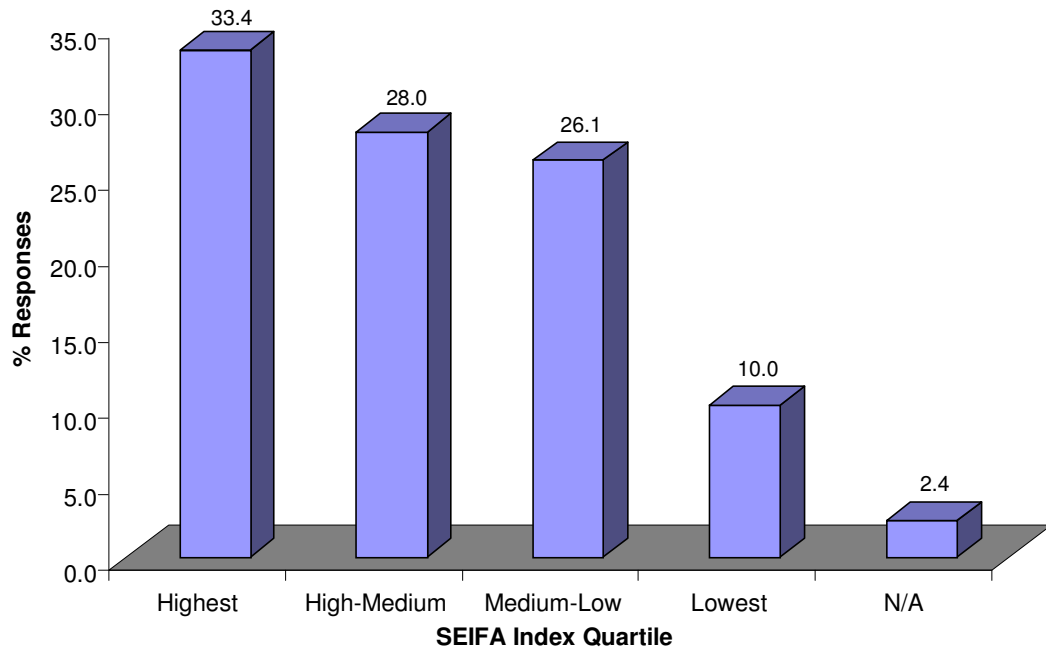
**Figure 2.1. Distribution of survey responses from Australia's states**

Figure 2.2 below shows the size of the families surveyed, according to how many children were in each family (No. of children). The percentage of families surveyed with each family size is shown (% Responses). The total number of children in all the families was 1922. The average family surveyed had 2.1 ( $\pm 0.8$ ) (mean ( $\pm$ standard deviation)) children.



**Figure 2.2. Distribution of survey responses according to family size**

Figure 2.3 below shows the percentage of families surveyed according to their Socio-Economic Index for Areas 2001 (SEIFA index) for their postal area. The index of Advantage/Disadvantage was used in this analysis. The participants were grouped according to their quartile of the Australian averages for this SEIFA index. “Highest” indicates those in the 75% to 100% quartile. “High-Medium” indicates those in the 50% to 75% quartile. “Medium-Low” indicates those in the 25% to 50% quartile. “Lowest” indicates those in the 0% to 25% quartile. N/A refers to those who did not indicate their postcode.



**Figure 2.3. Percentage of survey responses in each SEIFA index quartile**

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantity and location of TV sets

Over three-quarters of families have two or more TV sets in their home, and over one-third of families have three or more TV sets. Figure 3.1 below shows the percentage of families (% Responses) that have each number of TV sets in their home. The total number of TV sets in all the families surveyed was 1998. The number of TV sets on average was 2.2 ( $\pm 1.0$ ) TV sets per family.

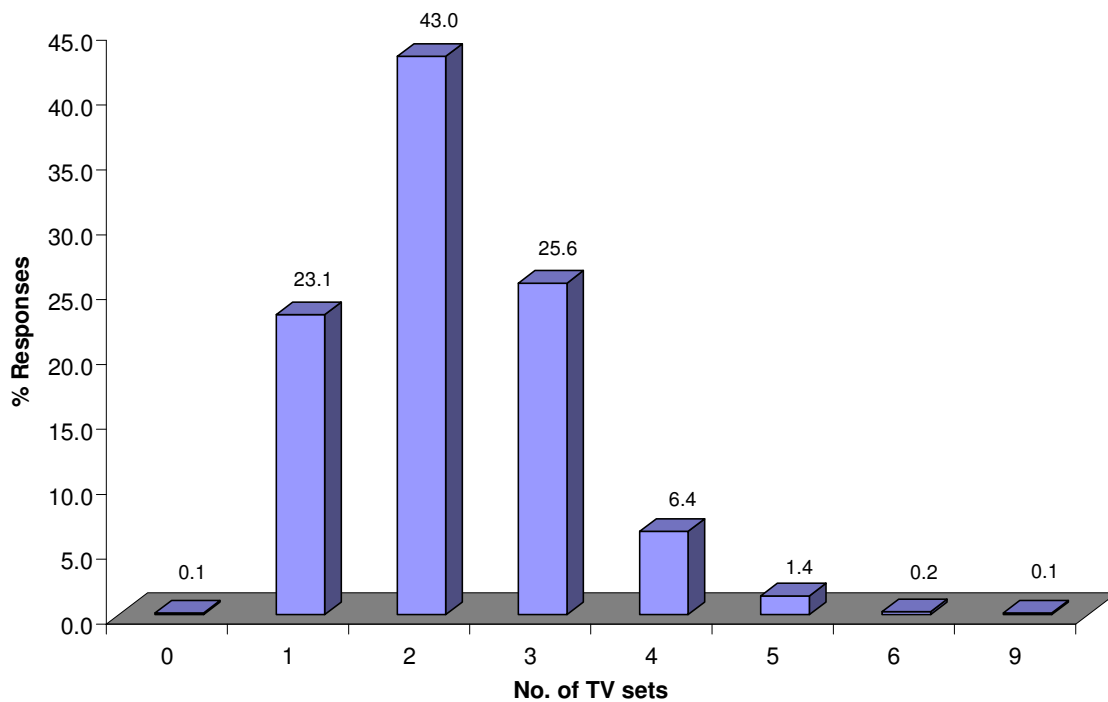


Figure 3.1. Number of TV sets in each family

Most families either have a TV in their 'family room' or their 'lounge', and often they have one in each of these rooms. Over a third of families have a TV in the parent bedroom, six percent of families have a TV in the preschooler's sibling's bedroom, and 9.8% of preschoolers have a TV in their own bedroom. Figure 3.2 below shows the room location of TVs in the home. The percentage of families with a TV in each room is shown (% Families).

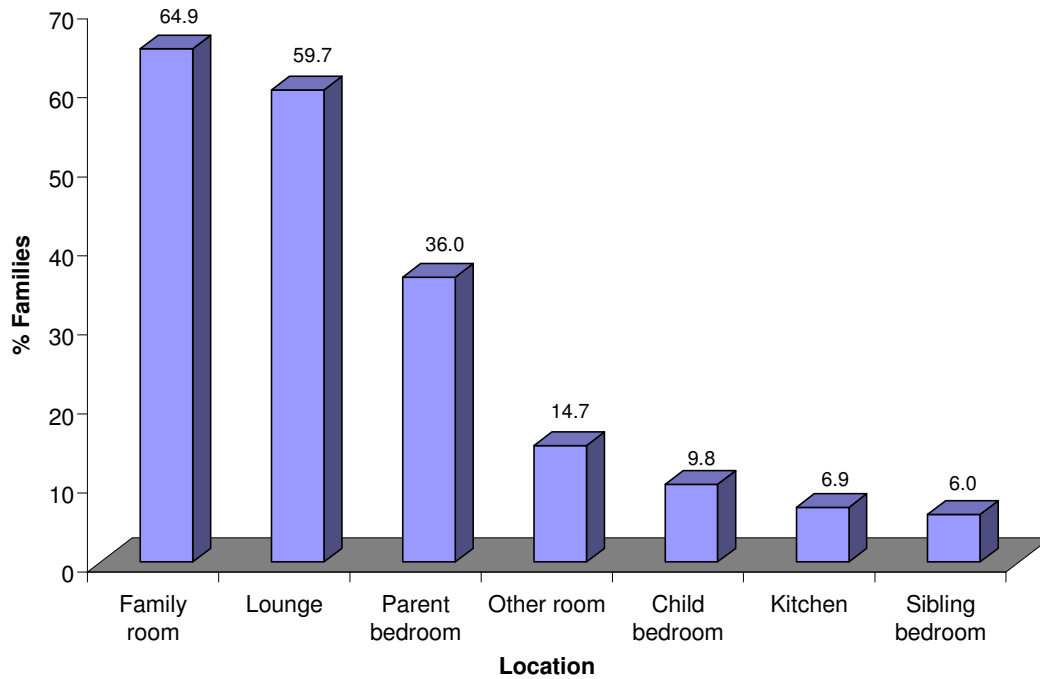


Figure 3.2. Location of TV sets in the home

### 3.2. Preschoolers’ TV watching habits

#### 3.2.1. Quantity of TV watched by preschoolers

The total time preschoolers watched was surveyed, and the median result for each timeslot of the day is listed in Table 3.1 below. The participants were asked to respond within five category durations (none, less than half an hour, half hour to an hour, one hour to two hours, and greater than two hours). Therefore the median result was calculated and reported below.

Table 3.1. Average quantity of TV watched by preschoolers (median)

Time of day	Weekday		Saturday	Sunday
	Minutes	Time of day	Minutes	Minutes
6:30am-10am	30-60	6:30am-10am	30-60	30-60
10am-3:30pm	0	10am-2pm	0	0
3:30pm-6pm	30-60	2pm-6pm	0-30	0-30
6pm-7:30pm	0-30	6pm-7:30pm	30-60	30-60
7:30pm-9pm	0	7:30pm-9pm	0	0
Total	60-150		60-150	60-150

From this we can see that there are six timeslots where preschoolers are watching the greatest amount of TV (30-60 minutes):

- 1) Weekdays – 6:30am-10am
- 2) Weekdays – 3:30pm-6pm

- 3) Saturdays – 6:30am-10am
- 4) Saturdays – 6pm-7:30pm
- 5) Sundays – 6:30am-10am
- 6) Sundays – 6pm-7:30pm

Table 3.2 below also shows the quantity of TV watched by preschoolers. This analysis combined the five category durations into three (less than half an hour, half hour to an hour, and greater than 1 hour). It indicates the percentage of preschoolers (%) that watch for each of these durations, in each timeslot.

**Table 3.2. Percentage of preschoolers watching TV in each timeslot**

Weekday		Weekday	Weekend		Saturday	Sunday
Time of day	Quantity	%	Time of day	Quantity	%	%
6:30am-10am	<1/2 hr	33.9	6:30am-10am	<1/2 hr	31.8	41.3
	1/2 hr - 1 hr	40.3		1/2 hr - 1 hr	41.5	37.6
	>1hr	25.7		>1hr	26.8	21.1
10am-3:30pm	<1/2 hr	79.7	10am-2pm	<1/2 hr	82.5	83.4
	1/2 hr - 1 hr	12.1		1/2 hr - 1 hr	12.1	11.1
	>1hr	8.2		>1hr	5.4	5.5
3:30pm-6pm	<1/2 hr	32.4	2pm-6pm	<1/2 hr	61.8	64.0
	1/2 hr - 1 hr	43.2		1/2 hr - 1 hr	22.4	22.2
	>1hr	24.4		>1hr	15.9	13.9
6pm-7:30pm	<1/2 hr	54.8	6pm-7:30pm	<1/2 hr	43.7	49.9
	1/2 hr - 1 hr	33.3		1/2 hr - 1 hr	38.9	37.4
	>1hr	12.0		>1hr	17.4	12.7
7:30pm-9pm	<1/2 hr	84.2	7:30pm-9pm	<1/2 hr	80.1	83.8
	1/2 hr - 1 hr	13.2		1/2 hr - 1 hr	14.0	12.4
	>1hr	2.6		>1hr	5.8	3.7

From Table 3.2 above we can see when preschoolers are watching TV for longer periods of time. There are four timeslots where greater than 20% of preschoolers are watching for one hour or more:

- 1) Saturday – 6:30am-10am (26.8%)
- 2) Weekday – 6:30am-10am (25.7%)
- 3) Weekday – 3:30pm-6pm (24.4%)
- 4) Sunday – 6:30am-10am (21.1%)

There are six timeslots where greater than 50% of preschoolers are watching for half an hour or more:

- 1) Saturday – 6:30am-10am (68.3%)
- 2) Weekday – 3:30pm-6pm (67.6%)
- 3) Weekday – 6:30am-10am (66%)
- 4) Sunday – 6:30am-10am (58.7%)
- 5) Saturday – 6pm-7:30pm (56.3%)
- 6) Sunday – 6pm-7:30pm (50.1%)

### 3.2.2. TV Channels watched by preschoolers

Participants were asked to nominate which TV channel was most watched by the preschooler in each timeslot of the week. They were asked to respond within five category types (ABC, Channels 7, 9, or 10, SBS, Pay TV, or Videos/DVDs). Therefore the mode result was calculated and reported below in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3. TV Channels watched by preschoolers**

Weekday		Saturday		Sunday
Time of day	Channel	Time of day	Channel	Channel
6:30am-10am	ABC	6:30am-10am	7,9,10	ABC
10am-3:30pm	Videos/DVDs	10am-2pm	Videos/DVDs	Videos/DVDs
3:30pm-6pm	ABC	2pm-6pm	Videos/DVDs	Videos/DVDs
6pm-7:30pm	7,9,10	6pm-7:30pm	7,9,10	7,9,10
7:30pm-9pm	7,9,10	7:30pm-9pm	7,9,10	7,9,10

### 3.2.3. Who is in control of the remote?

Table 3.4 below shows who controls the TV in each of the timeslots. Results in this table are shown as percentages. From this we can see that mothers are clearly the most in control of the TV watching for the preschooler, across all timeslots. However the preschoolers, on average, were the second most in control. In the evenings, the fathers increased their influence on the channel watched. Children were left to their own choice the more often during the early mornings of every day of the week. While children were left in control in the mornings, they mostly chose to watch the ABC at those times, except for Saturday mornings. On Saturday and Sunday mornings the watching habits gained some further influence from an older sibling.

**Table 3.4. Who is in control of the remote?**

Weekday	Child	Mother	Father	Older Sibling	TV is just on	Other
6:30am-10am	25.1	58.7	3.5	5.9	1.0	5.8
10am-3:30pm	19.3	60.4	5.1	1.8	4.8	8.5
3:30pm-6pm	22.0	53.9	6.2	9.9	2.6	5.5
6pm-7:30pm	11.9	50.3	14.5	6.2	8.5	8.6
7:30pm-9pm	8.0	50.3	17.3	3.2	9.6	11.5
Average	17.3	54.7	9.3	5.4	5.3	8.0
Saturday	Child	Mother	Father	Older Sibling	TV is just on	Other
6:30am-10am	27.0	40.6	8.9	13.2	1.5	8.9
10am-2pm	21.8	44.5	10.5	7.0	6.4	9.9
2pm-6pm	20.6	44.6	11.0	9.4	6.3	8.1
6pm-7:30pm	11.1	45.5	18.4	6.3	8.7	9.9
7:30pm-9pm	8.5	46.4	21.0	3.4	8.2	12.5
Average	17.8	44.3	14.0	7.9	6.2	9.9
Sunday	Child	Mother	Father	Older Sibling	TV is just on	Other
6:30am-10am	26.7	37.4	12.2	12.6	1.9	9.1
10am-2pm	20.9	42.4	12.5	7.6	6.4	10.2
2pm-6pm	19.7	40.0	16.0	8.1	6.6	9.6
6pm-7:30pm	11.6	45.8	17.7	5.3	9.5	10.2
7:30pm-9pm	7.6	47.9	19.7	3.2	9.2	12.4
Average	17.3	42.7	15.6	7.4	6.7	10.3
Overall Average	17.5	47.2	13.0	6.9	6.1	9.4

Table 3.5 below shows a combination of information surrounding the TV watching habits of preschoolers over the different days of the week and different times throughout each day. It shows the averages for how much preschoolers are watching (quantity), what channel they watch (Channel), and the percentage that the child is in control of the remote (% Control by Child) for each of the timeslots. It also includes the percentage of preschoolers watching commercial TV in each timeslot (% Commercial).

**Table 3.5. TV watching habits of preschoolers**

Weekday	Quantity	Channel	% Commercial	% Control by Child
6:30am-10am	30-60	ABC	4.4	25.1
10am-3:30pm	0	Videos	1.4	19.3
3:30pm-6pm	30-60	ABC	6.4	22.0
6pm-7:30pm	0-30	7,9,10	31.9	11.9
7:30pm-9pm	0	7,9,10	13.0	8.0
Saturday	Quantity	Channel	% Commercial	% Control by Child
6:30am-10am	30-60	7,9,10	28.7	27.0
10am-2pm	0	Videos	3.5	21.8
2pm-6pm	0-30	Videos	4.6	20.6
6pm-7:30pm	30-60	7,9,10	29.2	11.1
7:30pm-9pm	0	7,9,10	12.6	8.5
Sunday	Quantity	Channel	% Commercial	% Control by Child
6:30am-10am	30-60	ABC	15.7	26.7
10am-2pm	0	Videos	4.3	20.9
2pm-6pm	0-30	Videos	5.9	19.7
6pm-7:30pm	30-60	7,9,10	29.3	11.6
7:30pm-9pm	0	7,9,10	12.2	7.6

### 3.3. Parents' perceptions of television, food advertising, nutrition and obesity

#### 3.3.1. Parent to child responsibilities

The following statements show the parents' views regarding their knowledge or how they should educate their children, in relation to nutrition and TV watching:

- 93.3% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that they are confident in knowing which foods are good and bad for their children.
- 98.1% of parents have tried to teach their preschooler about good and bad food.
- 95.1% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that it is appropriate for them to control the amount of commercial TV their children watch.
- 74.5% of parents have tried to set limits on how much commercial TV their children watch.

- 98% of parents have tried to limit the number of commercial programs that their preschooler watches, and have firmly said “no” to others.

The responses to question 4.7 (see Appendix B) were sorted into 4 categories as listed in Table 3.6 below along with a brief description of each category. In this question the parents were asked to describe how they might have tried to cut down the amount of commercial TV their child watches. The numbers of responses in each category (N) are listed below in Table 3.7, along with the percentage of respondents that included that category in their answer (%). Note that sometimes respondents included more than one category in their answer, and therefore the *total responses* are more than the *total families*. A total of 25.1% of families responded to this question.

**Table 3.6. The categories and descriptions of the methods used by parents to reduce their child’s quantity of commercial TV watching**

Category	Description
Limit	Limiting the amount, times and types of TV watched
Play	Playing games indoors or outdoors or giving other alternative activity choices
Educate	Educating kids about food and advertising by talking about it
Nothing	No problems with advertising. Not much of an issue with them

**Table 3.7. Distribution of parents’ responses of their method of reducing commercial TV watching**

Response	N	%
Limit	126	55.3
Play	71	31.1
Educate	27	11.8
Nothing	27	11.8
Total Responses	251	-
Total Families	228	25.1

### 3.3.2. Parents’ concerns

The following statements show the parents’ concerns regarding obesity, nutrition and TV food advertising in the community:

- 98.1% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that childhood obesity and overweight is a major concern in Australia.
- 99.3% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that changing children’s unhealthy eating would help reduce childhood obesity and overweight.

- 88.6% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that most food ads tried to sell foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, and are of low nutritional value.
- 74.1% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that cutting down the number of food ads children watch would help reduce childhood obesity and overweight.
- 82.5% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that food companies should stop selling unhealthy foods to their children through TV advertising.
- 80.1% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that the government should put more controls on TV food advertising to children.
- 56.1% of parents agreed to some extent or fully agreed, that TV food advertising to children should be banned.

The responses to question 5.10 (see Appendix B) were sorted into 4 categories as listed in Table 3.8 below along with a brief description of each category. In this question the parents were asked to give any other comments about television food advertising and childhood obesity. The numbers of responses in each category (N) are listed below in Table 3.9, along with the percentage of respondents that included that category in their answer (%). Note that sometimes respondents included more than one category in their answer, and therefore the *total responses* are more than the *total families*. A total of 38.6% of families responded to this question.

**Table 3.8. The categories and descriptions of parents' extra comments about television food advertising and childhood obesity**

Category	Description
Parents	Parents are the ones who are responsible for the children's diet
Advertising	Advertising should be changed
Exercise	Exercise also has a factor in obesity. An overall healthy lifestyle is needed, including diet and exercise
Nothing	No problems with advertising. Not much of an issue for them

**Table 3.9. Distribution of parents' responses to their extra comments about television food advertising and childhood obesity**

Response	N	%
Parents	235	67.0
Advertising	102	29.1
Exercise	65	18.5
Nothing	32	9.1
Total Responses	434	-
Total Families	351	38.6

### *3.3.3. Children's requests for food*

The following statements suggest what effect TV food advertising might have on children's requests for food:

- 69.5% of parents said that their children had asked to buy food as advertised on TV.
- 87.2% of parents said that their children had asked to buy food that has pictures of TV or movie characters on the packaging.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Preschoolers exposed to TV advertising

This survey has shown that during certain timeslots throughout the week, there is a greater exposure of children to TV advertising. Table 3.6 shows some interesting data supporting this. We can determine the times during the week that preschoolers would be most likely exposed to the most TV advertising. These times may include when:

- 1) the quantity of TV watched is higher
- 2) the channel watched is more often commercial channels
- 3) the control of the remote remains with the child more often (on these occasions parents cannot monitor the advertising content exposed to the child)

When a combination of these three factors is elevated, it shows the higher exposure times of advertising to preschoolers.

From Table 3.6 we can see that the highest exposure time is:

- 1) Saturday mornings between 6:30am and 10am.

We suggest that the next highest exposure times are:

- 2) Sunday early evenings between 6pm and 7:30pm
- 3) Saturday early evenings between 6pm and 7:30pm
- 4) Weekday early evenings between 6pm and 7:30pm

Sunday mornings between 6:30am and 10am may also be a high exposure time. Even though the percentage of children watching commercial TV during this timeslot is lower, the percentage of children in control of the remote at this time is quite high. Therefore, we are not certain of what the children are actually watching. Without the parents' control of the TV, the children may be watching any of the channels. A high control of the remote by the child is also shown during other timeslots, as shown on Table 3.6, however, at those times either the duration or the percentage watching commercial TV is very small so that any variation should not cause any great alarm.

Higher exposure time of TV advertising to children most likely also means higher exposure time of food advertising. A junk food advertising audit conducted by the Australian Divisions of General Practice, 2003, found that within each ad break of children's television programs there was an average of one food advertisement, with 99% of these being for junk food. As

soon as children are exposed to high amounts of commercial TV, they are exposed to high amounts of advertising, and hence, high amounts of advertising for junk foods.

Limiting exposure to junk food advertising could be obtained simply by parents limiting the amount of commercial TV children watch. However, as shown in section 3.3.1, 98% of parents have tried to limit the number of commercial programs that their preschooler watches, and have firmly said no to other programs. Parents already know their responsibilities towards their children's TV watching habits. 95.1% of parents think that it is appropriate for them to control the amount of commercial TV their children watch. Even so, it has been widely documented that we continue to see a rise in children's use of TV and other activities involving screens (e.g. computers, the internet, and video games). Parents are suggesting that they already know about their responsibilities towards their children's TV watching habits, and they are implementing them, therefore there needs to be further action that can limit children's exposure to TV food advertising.

#### **4.2. Support for TV advertising bans**

Obesity has been widely documented to be a major problem in most developed countries. Australia is amongst the worst few countries, with alarming trends showing increasing rates of overweight and obesity. This is a health epidemic, quickly becoming one of the largest areas that governments need to spend their money on. Obesity is a risk factor for type II diabetes, and also for two of the largest causes of death in Australia – heart disease and stroke. However, it is widely known that a combination of good nutrition and moderate physical activity will allow people to maintain a healthy body and weight. Further, good nutritional and physical activity habits learned during childhood and adolescence lead to lifelong habits and a healthier adult life. Therefore, it is extremely important, and of economic benefit, that the governments of today support good nutritional and physical activity habits in children, to prepare a better future for this country.

This survey has shown that parents are concerned about the levels of childhood obesity and overweight, and the amount of exposure of food advertising to children. 98.1% of parents agreed that childhood obesity and overweight is a major concern in Australia, and 99.3% of parents agreed that changing children's unhealthy eating habits would help reduce this. Most parents know that food ads are nearly always trying to sell foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, and are of low nutritional value. This is one reason why parents of young children have

been trying to limit the amount of commercial TV their children watch, as shown by this survey, where 74.1% of parents agreed that cutting down the number of food ads children watched would help reduce childhood obesity and overweight.

Limitations on TV junk food advertising should be implemented by government authorities in order to stop the high exposure of young children. In Australia, where over 99% of food advertisements during children's TV programs are for junk food, children are being strongly influenced, giving them a deceptive message about nutrition. Parents generally try to do the best for their children; however, many of them know that they cannot limit their children's exposure to advertising on their own. 80.1% of parents think that governments should put more controls on TV food advertising to children. Government controls on advertising during children's television programs and specific timeslots during the week (e.g. Saturday mornings between 6:30am and 10am), could severely decrease the number of junk food advertisements that children are exposed to. 56.1% of parents would even prefer that TV food advertising to children be banned completely. This is a strong indication that parents are distressed with the current level of advertising, and that they want the government to place greater controls over TV junk food advertising to their children.

#### **4.3. Influence of TV and movie characters in food advertising**

Due to technological advances, children have a higher accessibility to television and other media, now more than ever. Therefore their daily choices are more influenced by television and other media also. Advertising has a major involvement in most types of media, and especially in television. It can generate a lot of wealth and it can be a powerful persuader, especially to children. 69.5% of parents in this survey suggested that their children had asked to buy food as advertised on TV. Young children under six years do not have the ability to distinguish between advertising material and regular television programming. Children tend to believe that advertisements are telling the truth, and they do not understand that the advertising is trying to sell them a product.

Increasingly, supermarkets and large fast food chains are using television or movie characters in conjunction with their food advertising. The promotions usually involve marketing a toy to be included with the sale of a food, or even simply a picture of the character. Children see the television or movie characters advertised and then often request the product to be purchased. 87.2% of parents in this survey suggested that their children have asked to buy food that has

pictures of TV or movie characters on the packaging. In most cases, junk foods or fast foods are the types of foods connected to TV or movie characters. Therefore, children are unknowingly asking for junk foods, simply because of their attraction to the TV or movie character.

Limitations on advertising, which uses TV or movie characters to sell products, should be implemented by government authorities in order to stop cross promotion with junk foods. Parents, and often relatives, may give in to children's requests for these foods because of the character associated with the food, and they tend to purchase to please. However, parents would prefer if the characters were not associated with unhealthy foods. 82.5% of parents agreed that food companies should stop selling unhealthy foods to their children through TV advertising.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is important that children develop healthy eating preferences and develop good nutritional habits at an early age, as they lead to lifelong habits and a healthier adult life. This can help to alleviate the increasing rates of obesity and overweight, which are having a huge effect on the health of our population, and on the health budgets.

This survey explored the media environment in preschool children's homes, and their parents' attitudes to TV food advertising in relation to issues of overweight and obesity. It has provided useful information to support the development of interventions designed to reduce children's exposure to TV food ads.

Most homes had more than 2 TV sets, and mothers had control of the remote for most periods of the day.

However, close to 30% of preschool children controlled the remote at times such as Saturday and Sunday mornings. On Saturday mornings, as there was no programming for children on the ABC, preschool children were watching commercial TV between 6.30am and 10am. This is a time slot which other research has shown to be dominated by food ads. The next highest exposures for children to food ads occur between 6pm and 7:30pm every night of the week.

Parents in this study attest to the effectiveness of current TV food advertising seen by children, and especially advertising which linked characters from films or cartoons to foods.

Many parents used the ABC as a source of suitable programming for their preschool children, and were willing to use it, or videos or DVDs as an alternative to commercial TV.

Parents of preschool children want advertising of unhealthy foods to their children to stop, and governments to introduce more effective regulation. They also believe that food corporations should stop marketing unhealthy foods to young children through TV advertising.

## **6. Future directions for the development of interventions**

This survey provides significant pointers for the refining and expansion of Young Media Australia's basic intervention "keep your children out of the firing line" delivered to parents of preschool children in 2005/6, via a brochure, 5 min infomercial, 60sec commercial, and 3 Fact sheets.

We note that:

### ***In regard to the home media environment and viewing habits***

- a) most preschoolers come from homes in which there are more than 2 TV sets
- b) mothers are the principal determinants of TV choices at all times of the day.
- c) 27% of preschoolers choose what they will watch at certain times of the week.
- d) nearly 10% of preschoolers had a TV in their own bedrooms
- e) the largest numbers of preschool children are watching early morning TV on weekdays or at weekends, followed by 3-6pm on weekdays, and 6-7.30pm on weekends.
- f) The ABC is the channel chosen by families early mornings and 3.30pm to 6pm on weekdays, and many parents were appreciative of what the ABC offered young children. However, due to a lack of programming for preschool children on the ABC on Saturdays and late afternoons, the audience shifts to the commercial channels.
- g) 72% of mothers thought it was OK for their children to watch commercial TV.
- h) 63% of children sometimes or often eat while watching TV

*Recommendation 1*

Encourage parents to take charge of preschool children's TV choices at all times.

*Recommendation 2*

Mothers are the appropriate targets for messages about young children's TV choices.

*Recommendation 3*

Discourage the placement of TV sets in children's bedrooms, and encourage their placement in "public places".

*Recommendation 4:*

Encourage mothers to choose non commercial media in early morning time slots, and in late afternoons and early evenings.

*Recommendation 5:*

Encourage parents to have a supply of alternative media at those times when the ABC has no suitable programming for preschool children

*Recommendation 6*

Suggest that Pay TV (eg Nick Jr which has no food ads) is an alternative (acknowledging the significant cost of same)

*Recommendation 7*

Provide mothers with more information about the inability of preschool children to deal with advertising and to understand selling intent

*Recommendation 8*

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.

***In regard to perceptions of TV advertising's influence on children***

- i) 69.5% of children had asked to buy advertised foods
- j) 87.2% of children had asked to buy foods with characters on the packets

### *Recommendation 9*

Consider options for limiting the use of characters from children's programs or films on food packaging.

### *In regard to perceptions about the problem of obesity*

- a) 76% of parents fully agree and a further 22% partly agree that obesity is a major concern in Australia
- b) 91% do not think that any of their family is overweight
- c) 93% are confident that they know what foods are good/ not good for their children
- d) 88% of parents agreed that most food ads try to sell foods that are high in fat, sugar, salt.
- e) 74.1 % of parents agreed that cutting down the number of food ads will help reduce obesity and overweight
- f) 82.5% of parents wanted advertisers to stop selling unhealthy foods to their children, and called for more govt controls on food advertising
- g) when asked for further comments, many parents expressed the view that 'food ads shouldn't be blamed for all the problems, it was all up to parents to limit their children's TV and to know what was good for their children to eat.' Others pointed out that today's parents, who have been brought up with TV food advertising, may not be good judges of what is healthy eating.

### *Recommendation 10*

A component of the delivery of the 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.

### *Recommendation 11*

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 gently suggesting that they will have an easier task in doing that if their children are kept out of the firing line.

*Recommendation 12*

Steps need to be taken to raise the industry's awareness of the high levels of parental concern about present marketing practices to young children.

*Recommendation 13*

Further representations should be made to government to find effective regulatory controls on food advertising seen by young children.