

**Statement of Patti Miller, Vice President, Children Now  
FCC Task Force on Media and Childhood Obesity  
March 21, 2007**

Thank you Senator Brownback, Senator Harkin, Chairman Martin, Commissioner Tate and Commissioner Copps for the invitation to participate on this task force and your commitment to this very important issue.

Last summer, Children Now held a national conference, *The Future of Children's Media: Advertising* and was very pleased when Senator Brownback announced there that he wanted to form a task force to address the role of media in the childhood obesity epidemic. Our nation's children face an unprecedented public health crisis. For the first time in modern history, we have a generation of children whose life expectancy may be lower than that of their parents. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in the past three decades, there has been a 300 percent increase in the rate of U.S. children who are either overweight or obese. The U.S. Surgeon General has identified overweight and obesity as "the fastest growing cause of disease and death in America."

While there is a confluence of factors that contribute to childhood obesity, advertising is clearly one of those factors and a significant one at that. And it is the factor that this task force can and *must* address.

American companies spend \$15 billion a year on advertising and marketing to children under the age of 12—twice the amount they spent just 10 years ago. Children are exposed to tens of thousands of ads each year on television alone, the majority of which are for fast food, junk food and sugared cereals. In addition, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that 85% of the top food brands targeting kids on television also use branded websites to market to kids using a range of strategies including, advergames, viral marketing, sweepstakes, promotions, memberships and online television ads.

So why does this matter? Research shows that young children are uniquely vulnerable to commercial persuasion. Children under the age of eight don't recognize the persuasive intent of ads and tend to accept them as accurate and unbiased. Children ages four and under cannot consistently discriminate between program content and advertising. In fact, research shows that 30-second commercials influence food preferences in children as young as two years-old.

Congress and the FCC have recognized children's vulnerability in this arena which is why there are limits on the amount of advertising during children's programs as well as rules about how children's favorite TV characters can be used to pitch products to them. But these regulations are simply not enough to protect children from a food advertising environment that is skewed toward promoting unhealthy, non-nutritious food to the nation's youth.

In December 2005, the Institute of Medicine released a report that concluded that “food and beverage practices geared to kids are out of balance with healthful diets and contribute to an environment that puts children’s health at risk.” The committee found strong, compelling evidence that television advertising influences the food and beverage preferences, purchase requests and consumption habits of children. The IOM recommended that the food industry voluntarily shift advertising and marketing targeted to kids to products and beverages that are lower in calories, fat, salt, and added sugars and higher in nutrient content. If the industry was not able to achieve more balance within two years, the IOM recommended that Congress intervene.

Children Now believes that the primary goal of this task force should focus on the IOM’s recommendation—achieving more balance between the healthy versus unhealthy foods advertised and marketed to children. While we appreciate the range of industry efforts undertaken to address childhood obesity to date, we believe that public service announcements for exercise and good nutrition placed among an abundance of ads for unhealthy foods is not enough to shift that balance. More needs to be done.

Children Now looks forward to working with representatives from the media industry, food and beverage industries, advertising associations, advocacy and public health organizations and government and hope we can achieve more balance in the advertising of healthy versus unhealthy foods. However, if this cannot be done voluntarily, we believe Congress has an obligation to intervene on behalf of the nation’s children.

All of us in the room today, while representing a range of constituencies, organizations and companies, share a commitment to creating a healthier media environment for the nation’s children. Let’s work together towards real, tangible solutions that will make a true difference for kids. Our children’s health depends on it.