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Obesity Epidemic in Children: Urgent Call to Action

Imagine this front-page news story: "SARS epidemic infects 60 million Americans with economic losses exceeding \$1 trillion. In response, the government announces a massive public health campaign, industry pledges full cooperation regardless of cost, and school districts agree to take all necessary measures" (*The Boston Globe*, May 29, 2003).

Fortunately, SARS has not reached these proportions...but obesity has. The prevalence of obesity is a national epidemic and fast becoming America's most significant public health issue.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- The rate of obesity among children and youths tripled over the past 30 years; and
- Overweight people are more at risk for diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis, cancer, and other ailments diminishing quality of life and causing premature death (*The Boston Globe*, October 11, 2003).

Moreover, obesity surpassed smoking as a public health concern in a poll commissioned by the Harvard School of Public Health.

The media and academics alike use terms such as *Baby Boomers* and *Generation X* to refer to different demographic and cultural generations. In recent months, the media has adapted such monikers to refer to children and youths affected with weight problems. Use of descriptors such as *Super-sized children* and *Generation XL* have become commonplace.

Today's children may be the first generation of Americans whose life expectancies could actually be shorter than those of their parents if current obesity trends persist (*The New York Times*, October 12, 2003).

However, there is some good news. Various professional and governmental groups are now beginning to shift from regarding obese children as simply having self-control issues to viewing obesity as a disease and health epidemic, within a culture where youths are constantly bombarded with marketing messages emphasizing food and *super-sized* portions.

With such a formidable problem, how should schools, government, industry, and professional groups respond to this challenge and avert an impending calamity?

Children's Willpower vs Corporate Greed

Commercialism pervades the public education systems in the United States. Schools rely on corporate sponsorships as sources of sorely needed revenues. In turn, these corporate sponsors bombard youths with marketing messages emphasizing food/beverage consumption and *Super-sized* portions. This situation begs the question—Should schools discontinue their reliance on corporate sponsorships permitting exclusive rights to school cafeterias and vending machines, and encouraging such marketing practices?

This past summer, the Coca-Cola Company publicly vowed to roll back its marketing efforts to children under 12 years of age. However, Coke has recently become a sponsor of the national Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and awarded John H. Downs Jr., a senior vice president and chief lobby-

ist for Coca-Cola Enterprises, a seat on the Board (*The New York Times*, September 3, 2003). Is the integrity of the PTA at stake? Can the PTA speak with an uncompromised voice about the health effects of *junk food*, and carry out its vital mission of being the nation's largest volunteer child advocacy organization?

Replacing Apathy with Action

GENERATION XL

As public concern over obesity mounts, parents, teachers, and advocacy groups have started to work together to implement measures aimed at taking commercialism out of schools, for example—

- Both Nashville and Seattle have banned commercially-supported Channel One from their schools.
- California and Texas have approved restrictions in their schools on the sale of soda, candy, and foods of minimal nutritional value (*Commercial Alert*, July 31, 2003).

Reacting to the rise of public concern, Kraft Foods Inc vows to stop marketing its products to children in schools. Hopefully, other food companies will issue their own healthful credos in the coming months (*The Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2003).

Prevention of disease has always been a cornerstone of pediatric medicine. However, given the seriousness of the obesity epidemic, the American Academy of Pediatrics has been forced to publish its first-ever policy statement to address the problem entitled *Prevention of Pediatric Overweight and Obesity* (*Pediatrics*, August 2003). In its statement the academy recommends that pediatricians—

- Screen every child once a year using the body mass index (BMI), and make counseling a routine part of children's checkups.
- Actively promote anti-obesity programs in their communities.

The Academy hopes these procedures will identify at-risk children.

Society needs to get as serious about overweight and obesity as it has with the tobacco industry, or would in the event of a massive SARS outbreak. How can we avert an impending national calamity that could have grave economic and social consequences? What additional solutions to the epidemic might be applied in this *Age of Excess*? As professionals, what sustained measures could each of us take to address America's *obesity epidemic*, arguably the most serious public health crisis facing the country today?



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