

Food and toys

Alimentos e brinquedos

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Following preliminary approval by the Committee on the Environment and Consumer Defense, the Brazilian Senate is currently analyzing a bill of law with a pedagogical, political, and ethical scope and implications that could ensure it an important role in consolidating principles, standards, and practical measures in the process of food and nutritional security for the Brazilian population. The bill places a ban on so-called “promotional tie-ins”, or the combined sales of food products with toys, an advertising device that specifically targets children. In other words, kids receive toys as “presents” or “prizes” with the purchase of certain food products, so that in their natural urge to play or have fun, their instinctive and physiological expression of hunger (appetite) is displaced by a marketing ploy: toys as gratifications or rewards, as souvenirs tied to the purchase of chocolate, candy, breakfast food, snacks, and soft drinks. Sometimes the food itself is the toy or game, the point of departure or outcome of childhood fun, in which siblings, other children, and parents themselves play the role of bit actors in a game with a stacked deck. In other words, the winners and losers are known ahead of time. The winners are industry and commerce. The losers are the children and their families that agree to play the game.

Yet this is only the most visible part of the problem. Dissimulated (or even more osten-

sive) marketing ploys are pervasive: in the packages’ appearance, on radio and TV, on the supermarket shelves, in many schools’ snack bars and dining halls, and in the seemingly innocent games at kids’ clubs. In 2011, a PhD thesis¹ presented at the School of Public Health of the University of São Paulo called attention to the effect of food advertising on a cluster of low-income families (actually from a slum, half-urban, half-rural) in Garanhuns in the semiarid area of Pernambuco State, Northeast Brazil. This ethnographic study demonstrated the marketing control over children’s eating preferences and habits, forcing mothers and grandmothers to violate traditional dietary habits and purchase the products advertised on local TV. The most machiavellian part was a game of figurines hidden in the packages, stimulating kids to make complete collections in order to win a prize. Goaded on by the rules of the game in the attempt to complete their collections, the children were enticed into more food purchases, more trading of figurines, more partnerships, more links in the chain of co-participants. The end result is more consumption, in a web of buying, selling, and trading figurines, where healthy eating and nutrition are the least important part. The serious issue of eating has become a game in poor taste with negative outcomes for children, and by extension for their families and communi-

ties, besides public services and the pursuit of a healthy environment.

Children's eating habits actually begin during intrauterine life. In addition to direct fetal metabolic dependence mediated by the placenta, the fetus "tastes" what its mother eats, thereby becoming familiarized with the flavor of various foods and meals. Children's initial eating habits are thus shaped passively. Even before the experience in the visual field of the "food on the plate", the future food market is conquered subliminally. But obviously, when capturing new consumers for new products (created and exploited by open competition in industry and commerce), the most ostensive strategies for mobilizing consumers use direct investment in the children that circulate in the food courts, snack bars, dining halls, and food counters at public and private schools and watch all the TV commercials, generating fabulous sums in Brazil while advertising harmful candy, sweets, salty snacks, natural or artificial fat, excess calories, all kinds of additives, and any and all junk that their advertising produces and launches unchecked.

Are the consequences proven or potential? There are dozens and dozens of effects, jeopardizing health, even causing tens of millions of deaths. Although indirectly related to the current discussion, it is appropriate to cite the most crucial of all examples, namely the mass replacement of mothers' breast milk with industrialized formula milk in infant nutrition. For decades, the food industry bombarded obstetricians and pediatricians with advertising for formula milk, presented as the most practical, most complete, most "nutrient-rich", safest (from the perspective of bacterial contaminants), and thus the most recommended solution for infant nutrition. Straight to the point, Mike Muller intellectually sentenced this behavior in the classic book *The Baby Killer*², with baby bottles and pacifiers as instruments of death. No less striking was the manifesto by Michael Latham of the World Council of Churches, drawing on unassailable epidemiological data to denounce the complacency of philanthropic institutions with the "milk business" which spread

the scourge of powdered milk across the poor world, trampling the healthy age-old tradition of breastfeeding. Although using more restrained language, the cohort study by Cesar Victora et al. in Pelotas, Brazil³, is the equivalent of a manifesto, demonstrating that non-breastfeeding poses a 14-fold risk of infant death from diarrheal disease. The problem has become an epidemiological hecatomb in terms of mortality, the worst of the outcomes. Other more diffuse consequences, especially overweight/obesity (a kind of "baseline disease" in modern times), involve an accumulation of atherosclerotic diseases, diabetes mellitus, musculoskeletal conditions, various types of neoplasms, immune disorders, collagen diseases, and numerous other conditions that could be prevented or attenuated through the promotion of healthy eating and lifestyles⁴.

Breastfeeding is clearly the best start for healthy nutrition, but it is not everything. Dietary and nutritional surveillance is a continuous, lifelong process. And it even lasts after death, because good practices in health promotion and protection are trans-generational, passed down from grandparents to parents, to children, and to their descendants. In this chain, preschool and school-age eating habits are critical, not because these life phases are transitory, but due to the extension of their benefits (or harm) throughout life and for future generations.

The breastfeeding battle has already been won in conceptual, institutional, and political terms, but this victory needs to be consolidated in practice. And the war continues, as proven by subliminal food advertising in a multi-trillion-dollar global market. The use of toys to induce food product purchases for children is the most recent example of marketing practices that exploit children's immaturity and often parents' gullibility to violate ethical principles and healthy targets for proper eating. The ban on combined sales of food products and toys should mobilize different schools of thought and professional societies to raise general awareness concerning this public interest cause and to ensure proper ethics.

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