

Junk food generation

Written by Administrator

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Children's food choices are largely influenced by the advertisements that bombard them daily.

THE 12 children trooped obediently towards tables laden with food when they were told to, holding a square plastic container in their hands.

Looking on were their classmates from SK Kelana Jaya 1 in Petaling Jaya, sitting in neat rows of chairs at the back of the hall. The children had a small but fun task ahead to choose four types of food and a drink for their lunch, with choices ranging from chicken rice, burgers, fruit to confectionery.

Taking about 10 minutes to decide, they then returned to their table, happy with their box of goodies.

The event was the Lunch Box Challenge, organised by the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (Fomca) and Consumers International Kuala Lumpur (CI-KL) in conjunction with World Consumer Rights Day (WCRD) on March 15.

The theme of WCRD this year is Junk Food Generation: the Consumers International's campaign to stop the marketing of unhealthy food to children.

Mohd Imran Sazali, 11, chose a set meal from a Western fast food franchise, a common brand of chocolate, a popular carbonated drink and pre-packed biscuits.

I like (the Western set meal) and chocolates because they are tasty. I chose (the drink) because it's sweet and gassy, said Imran, who added that he usually has roti canai or nasi lemak for breakfast.

I prefer fried food to fruits and vegetables, he added.

Sherwin Diva, also 11, chose a banana, a tuna sandwich, an apple, a popular carbonated drink and the fast food set meal.

I like (the set meal) the best because it is mouth-watering and I like the apple because it is crunchy, smiled Sherwin, whose favourite fruit is durian.

He added that his parents take him to fast food outlets about three times a month. His usual breakfast at home consisted of bread, cereal, milk or a chocolate drink.

Meanwhile, Hoi Xen Pei, 12, seemed more health-conscious.

She picked a banana, biscuits, a local kuih, a fish burger from a fast food chain and mineral water.

I don't really like chocolates because they are heavy and I have to drink a lot of water, said Xen Pei, adding that her dad usually cooks spaghetti, noodles or Nyonya food for the family during the weekends.

Xen Pei said she drinks carbonated soft drinks during the weekends but limits herself to just one drink. Like most kids, she likes fast food but finds it too salty sometimes.

Overall, seven out of the 12 children chose the fast food set meal, five selected soft drinks, while only three picked mineral water. Half of them took chocolate bars and eight had the fish burger.

This is a clear indication that many children chose foods high in fat and sugar, said Datuk Indrani Thuraisingham, head of CI-KL.

One of the children selected a soft drink that was branded and heavily advertised compared to a same drink which was not, she said, adding that children were easily exploited by advertising.

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Around the world, CI member organisations (220 in 115 countries) highlighted the damage done by junk food marketing recently, with many organising similar Lunch Box Challenges in their countries.

Most obtained similar results ♦ kids tend to choose foods that were unhealthy but heavily advertised.

For example, in India, more than 60% of the children chose unhealthy foods during the challenge and also brought cooked instant noodles from home in their lunch boxes.

Fomca president Datuk Marimuthu Nadason said these challenges showed that all children chose foods that were frequently advertised.

♦ This trend is dangerous because many children will develop obesity problems later, ♦ he said, urging the new Health Minister to give more focus to educating children on healthy eating.

The World Health Organisation predicts that 2.3 billion people will be overweight by 2013. Currently, 117 million children are threatened by obesity-related diseases worldwide, with at least 22 million children under five years old already overweight or obese.

A WHO report entitled Marketing of Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children published in 2006 said there was evidence to prove that advertising of food high in fat, sugar and salt has a direct effect on children wanting and eating these unhealthy foods which lead to obesity.

Major food, soft drink and confectionery multinationals spent US\$13bil (RM41.6bil) on advertising in 2006.

In Malaysia, revenue from fast food advertising on TV, newspapers and billboards total over RM100mil annually.

Last December, the Health Ministry launched a set of guidelines on food labelling which required fast food operators to clearly display nutrient content on their products.

(For the purpose of the guidelines, the Health Ministry defined ♦ fast foods ♦ as ♦ foods that are prepared in large quantities, following standardised procedures and served rapidly in restaurants commonly known as fast food restaurants, which usually advertise their services through the electronic and print media ♦.)

Current guidelines on advertising to children also stipulate that fast food companies are prohibited from sponsoring children ♦ s programmes on television. There is also a ban on the airing of fast food commercials during children ♦ s programme.

The guidelines were supposed to take effect this January but on a self-regulatory basis by the industries. According to Fomca and CI-KL, not all of these rulings have been strictly followed.

In conjunction with WCRD, Fomca, CI and the International Obesity Task Force is calling for the International Code on the Marketing of Food to Children to be adopted by WHO and incorporated into national food marketing legislation.

The Code was launched worldwide on March 15 to mark WCRD and addresses the failure of the food industry to regulate itself.

It calls for the ban of television and radio advertisements of unhealthy food between 6am and 9pm; marketing of unhealthy food using new media such as websites, social networking sites and text messaging; promotion of unhealthy food in schools; use of free gifts, toys or collectible items which appeal to children;

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and use of celebrities, cartoon characters or competitions.

◆ All this has to stop. Our appeal is that consumers have to make rational decisions now. Children form the largest part of our population,◆ said Samuel Ochieng, president of Consumers International, in his speech after the Lunch Box Challenge.

He said the link between marketing and the behaviour of kids is confirmed.

◆ The damage is there. We are not targeting the ban of these products but their aggressive advertising and promotion that confuse kids.

◆ Parents are also suffering because they lose control of their children due to these advertisements,◆ said Ochieng, adding that many corporations promoted their products indirectly to children through sponsorship of TV programmes, projects or activities.

Indrani said fast food chains in some developed countries like The Netherlands have the ◆ traffic light◆ system where different coloured dots are placed on the wrapper according to nutrient content in the food, with red being the least nutritious.

◆ This allows consumers to make an informed decision. However, the same fast food chain in Malaysia and some other countries does not practise this system. Why the discrepancy?◆ she questioned.

Another example, added Indrani, was sugar content in breakfast cereals.

CI found that in Malaysia, there was 43g of sugar per 100g of a certain cereal but in Norway, it was only 25g per 100g.

◆ High levels of sugar cultivate sweet taste buds in children,◆ she stressed.

Self-regulation within the food industry in Malaysia was not effective, said Indrani, as multinational companies were free to adopt different standards in different countries. She said that having an international code would help address that issue.

Marimuthu urged corporations to practise responsible marketing.

◆ Food companies have developed many high calorie foods and bombarded children with their advertisement tactics. But studies have shown that kids tend to choose food with branded packaging than vice-versa, although the food may be the same.

◆ Multinational companies must take responsibility,◆ said Marimuthu.