

# Toying with kids' diets

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McDonald's is at the centre of a threatened lawsuit over its 'unfair and deceptive' marketing of toys to children, writes **COLETTE SHERIDAN**

PESTER POWER is the bane of parents' lives as they come up against the marketing of food that targets children by, for example, the inclusion of a toy with a McDonald's Happy Meal.

Now Washington-based consumer advocacy group, the Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), has threatened to file a lawsuit against the fast food chain, saying that it "unfairly and deceptively" markets toys to children.

California's Santa Clara County voted earlier this year to ban restaurants from giving away the toys that often come with high calorie meals aimed at children.

In recession-hit Ireland, cheap fast food, aggressively marketed, is a big seller, with McDonald's Happy Meals costing just €4.

While morbid obesity, caused by highly processed food, fizzy drinks and a sedentary lifestyle, used to be something generally associated with the US, Ireland is catching up.

In 2005, it was estimated 327,000 children here were overweight or obese and that the figure would increase by almost 11,000 per annum.

Director of the weight management clinics at St Columcille's Hospital and St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin, Dr Donal O'Shea, says children under the age of 12 can't distinguish between right and wrong when it comes to food selection.

“The whole use of celebrity and toys to market highly processed high fat and high salt foods is very effective from the company’s point of view,” says O’Shea.

“The constant association of food and toys becomes embedded in children’s psychology. I would like to see something done about this globally.”

O’Shea says that while the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland “has taken soundings and has a position statement that there should be a limit on advertising junk food, the problem is beyond television and radio. It’s the whole internet with its social networking and advertising content.”

He says there is a need to drive home the message that healthy and tasty food can be cooked for less than the price of some fast foods. He also cites parental responsibility, pointing out that parents would never give a child a cigarette. Why then would they give in to demands for food that can cause cancer and diabetes in later life? he asks.

Labour Party MEP, Nessa Childers, says she would rather go down the route of “consumer pressure and political pressure” than legislation to counteract the marketing of fast food.

“McDonald’s are seen as almost the *bête noir*,” says Childers. “But they have actually gone some distance – although not far enough in my opinion – to bring healthy food into their repertoire. You can have a salad in McDonald’s at midnight. That’s a direct result of pressure.”

Childers points out that since 2005, schools in France have banned vending machines selling fizzy drinks. “Junk food there has to carry a health warning; otherwise, there is a fine.”

Director of advocacy at the children’s charity, Barnardos Ireland, Norah Gibbons, believes “there should be much stricter controls on the manufacturers of junk food. Companies target children because they’re aware that pester power works.

“We believe the Government should not allow foods that can be demonstrated to be absolutely unhealthy to be marketed at children. We’re quite aware that the odd bit of inappropriate food won’t do any harm, but the problem is when it becomes a strong substitute.”

The CPSI, which has filed dozens of lawsuits against food companies in recent years, is hoping the publicity and threat of a lawsuit will force McDonald’s to negotiate with them on the issue.

It is confident that its first lawsuit against the chain will have a similar effect as its 2006 lawsuit against Kellogg’s. That prompted the company to agree to a settlement raising the nutritional values of the cereals and snacks it markets to children.

A spokesman for McDonald’s says the company “couldn’t disagree more” with CPSI’s assertion that its toys violate any laws. He says McDonald’s offer more variety than they ever have and Happy Meals include wholesome foods. “Getting a toy is just one part of a fun, family experience at McDonald’s,” he adds.

But as O’Shea points out, the fast food market “is a bit like the smoking industry. They know they have to get you hooked by the age of 16 – and then you’re there for life. We’re seeing the scale of obesity problems in our clinics.

“Ten years ago, we had no referrals for people unable to leave their houses by virtue of their size. Now, we have three such people. We’ve pretty much gone to the same level as the US.”