Parents can do more to fight childhood obesity

Commentary by Kash Cheong
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Next year (2015), advertisements for unhealthy food such as chocolates and soft drinks will be banned in Singapore if they target children aged 12 and below.

But healthy eating starts at home, and parents can do more to cultivate good dietary habits in their children.

Singapore's new ban on junk-food ads, which takes effect in January, is part of efforts to battle the bulge in children.

About 12 per cent of students in primary and secondary schools and junior colleges are obese, and this figure has not budged in the past three years.

So, the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore, the health authorities and representatives from the food and media industries have come together to tackle the problem.

The group has implemented a commendable framework that determines what commercials can be run, and what must not feature in local media, including billboards, and television promotions targeting children 12 and below. These include sugary products such as chocolates, soft drinks and other high-sodium foods.

The new move comes on the back of school efforts to get obese children to exercise during recess time or after classes. Many schools have also joined the Healthy Eating in Schools programme, where canteens can sell fried food only once a week.

While regulators, schools and industry players are doing their part, parents seem to be the missing element in this fat equation.

According to a joint survey by the Health Ministry and Health Promotion Board involving 108 parents and caregivers in 2012, eight in 10 children asked for a food or beverage after seeing an ad for it. And nine in 10 parents would give in.

Parliamentary Secretary for Health Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, speaking at a media briefing earlier this month, said: "Perhaps this is how parents think they show love to our children... but it might not be the best thing for their health in the long run."

Giving in to a pestering child may buy a moment’s peace but studies show that those obese in childhood are more likely to stay obese as adults. Being overweight increases the risk of suffering from heart disease, diabetes and hypertension, for instance.

Schools are already doing their part. At home, parents and caregivers could, for a
start, replace junk food with fruit, and fizzy drinks with water.

While restricting unhealthy food is one way out, it cannot be the long-term solution - parents cannot be watching over their children 24/7.

And even the new ad guidelines may not be foolproof. While it regulates children's websites domiciled in Singapore, it does not cover social media, apps or international websites.

Experience with a similar effort in Britain suggests that some food companies will find ways to circumvent the rules and market their products to children. Instead of using television or print ads, they have turned to online games or advertising in apps.

So, it is up to parents to teach their children how to eat right and exercise self-control. After all, parental intervention in children’s diet and what they see in the media help shape what they eat.

That is backed up by a new survey done across Singapore’s primary schools, led by Associate Professor May Oo Lwin of Nanyang Technological University’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information. The detailed findings will be released in December. She said: "Parents are the first line of socialisation for young children, they teach children what is right and wrong."

When shopping, parents can tell their children what is nutritious food and what is not. After watching a movie where the character eats a whole pizza, parents can discuss with them what a normal portion size is, Prof Lwin added. "They must put in that effort to create the norms of food consumption and purchase for their children," she said.

Parents can also tap online resources to educate their children. YouTube, for instance, features many documentaries showing the harm caused by obesity, as well as how to tackle it. One of them, BBC's Supersize versus Superskinny, shows how obese people in the United States struggle with daily life - many have to wear oxygen masks because they have trouble breathing when they sleep.

It is not a glorious vision of the future but possibly one that would get children to heed healthy dietary advice.

Another show, Secret Eaters, shows how we make unconscious food choices - adding extra olive oil on pizzas, reaching for that chocolate bar between meals - and how this harms our bodies.

Besides using these tools, parents can also form support groups to share these resources or, even better, lead by example and start getting fit as a family. Some overweight children are already referred to a Student Health Centre, where parents attend sessions on healthy eating and weight loss with their children. Parents are encouraged to practise healthy habits with them.

Their support as role models is important, said HPB's youth health division director K. Vijaya. "Children with strong parental support are more likely to develop healthy lifestyle habits that will stay with them for the longer term," she said.
Gleneagles child psychiatrist Lim Boon Leng said: "When the family eats healthy together, children feel less singled out to lose weight and are less likely to have self-esteem issues in future."

Singapore's food and advertising industries have taken a step towards helping children fight the flab. Schools are also doing their part. It is time for parents to step up.