

Assessment & Research on Child Feeding (ARCH) Policy Brief: Using Research for Advocacy to Improve Child Nutrition

Nutrition during the first two years of life is key. It helps children grow, feeds intelligence, and provides the foundation for a healthy and productive life. Focusing on this key window is part of Helen Keller International's overall strategy to target young children and their mothers with proven [Essential Nutrition Actions](#) that provide the right nutrition support when it is most needed.

Research for Advocacy

Our [Assessment and Research on Child Feeding \(ARCH\) project](#) focuses on improving nutrition during the essential first two years of life. The World Health Organization and UNICEF recommend that babies receive only breastmilk from birth to the age of six months, at which point appropriate complementary foods should be introduced while breastfeeding continues up to two years.

The project conducted research on the availability, promotion and consumption of commercially produced foods for children under two and used the findings to inform decision makers at the global and country level about how to improve policies that support infant and young child nutrition.

The [World Health Organization is developing guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children](#), and ARCH research findings are being used to inform them. While researching promotion and consumption of complementary foods, ARCH researchers also investigated other foods children are fed in the first two years of life, like breastmilk, breastmilk substitutes, and commercially prepared snack foods. They also assessed what types of promotions mothers see for these foods.

The research is now published online in the [Maternal & Child Nutrition journal](#).

Research findings and implications

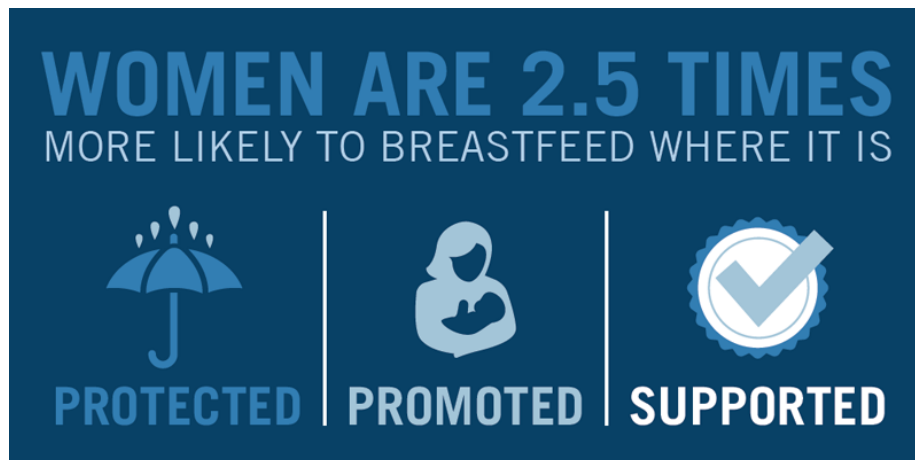
- **Finding:** In three of four countries, mothers report high levels of promotion for breastmilk substitutes (especially in Cambodia, where 86% of mothers reported seeing a promotion).
- **Implications:** *To support and protect breastfeeding, global guidance from the World Health Organization—the [International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes](#)—prohibits this kind of marketing. (Read more about the importance of breastfeeding and insights from ARCH findings in [this Devex quest column](#).)*
- **Finding:** Commercially produced complementary foods for children were often inappropriately labeled
- **Implications:** *Inappropriate labelling of complementary foods can undermine optimal breastfeeding practices. These labels may encourage mothers to feed complementary foods at too young an age or use servings that are too large and interfere with continued breastfeeding.*

ARCH research findings, continued

- **Findings:** Follow-up formulas and growing-up milks designed for children older than six months of age are frequently labeled like infant formula and often promoted. Some complementary foods are also labeled similarly to infant formula.
- **Implications:** *“Cross-promotion” is a form of marketing promotion that targets customers of one product or service with promotion of a related product. This can include packaging, branding and labelling of a product to closely resemble that of another (See photo). This practice can confuse mothers and also indirectly promotes all similarly labelled breastmilk substitutes.*
- **Finding:** In all countries, many mothers report feeding their infants and young children energy dense yet nutrient-poor sugary and salty snack foods, like chips or cookies. Mothers reported that commercially produced snack foods were the most highly promoted foods fed to young children (particularly in Nepal, where 74% of mothers said their children from 6-23 months of age consumed a commercially produced snack food on the day prior to interview. And nearly all these mothers -- 97% -- observed a promotion.
- **Implications:** *Eating commercial snack products high in salt or sugar can displace consumption of other more nutritious foods. These foods are also associated with dental caries and increased risk for overweight and developing chronic disease.*
- **Finding:** National laws governing marketing of these products may limit the prevalence of inappropriate promotion. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where strong laws governing marketing exist, the research found promotions were fewer.
- **Implications:** *Adopting the Code in full into national legislation is essential. In Senegal, the Ministry of Health has formed a committee to review and strengthen the existing law to better protect breastfeeding.*
- **Finding: Advocacy leveraging windows of opportunity can mobilize decision-makers.** In Cambodia, for example, high level commitment of policymakers to better monitor and enforce national laws on the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes led to creation of Oversight Board to fully implement the law.
- **Implications:** *Effective advocacy can help protect infant and young child nutrition.*

Recommendations for policymakers and program managers

- Governments should promote and protect optimal infant and young child nutrition
- Countries should align their laws with the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes
- Countries should monitor and enforce adherence to the Code
- Countries need global guidance on inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children



Source: The Lancet breastfeeding series

ABOUT ARCH

ARCH, a project managed by Helen Keller International, is conducting research on the promotion of commercially-produced foods commonly fed to children under age two in Asia and Africa and encouraging use of these findings for decision-making in policies and programs to improve infants and young child nutrition.

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