

## Guest Column: Watch what your kids eat - or government will

By John D. Colyandro and Brent D. Connett

Opinion

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**AUSTIN** - Apparently, Cap'n Crunch and Tony the Tiger have been conspiring with SpongeBob SquarePants and Dora the Explorer to fatten the wallets of evil executives, careless of the fact that they may fatten the waistlines of American children.

Believers in personal responsibility, beware. Good, responsible parents, look out. Protectionists are again asking the government to keep food and beverage marketers and manufacturers from making our children fat.

The problem of childhood obesity is serious. The Department of State Health Services notes that 35 percent of Texas school-age children are either overweight or obese. Real, serious health risks are associated with the excess weight these children carry, including asthma, hypertension, Type 2 diabetes and an increased likelihood of eventual coronary heart disease.

However, the nagging nannies of nutrition contend that soft drink vending machines in schools are to blame for making children fat. Others argue that carefully placed advertisements entice children into poor eating habits. However, many of those who would "save" children from a life of obesity have one thing in common: They diminish the importance of personal and parental responsibility.

A new study conducted by an independent economist, and touted by the American Beverage Association, notes that schools' sales of full-calorie carbonated soft drinks are down 24 percent since 2002. This ought to be good news in the respect that it might indicate parents are helping their children make more intelligent decisions about nutrition. In fact, the beverage association proudly announces the decreased school sales in an effort to combat arguments that they are to blame for childhood obesity.

However, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a protectionist nutrition and health advocacy group, lambastes the study not on technical grounds but as an indication that sales aren't down quite enough for their taste. CSPI Executive Director Michael F. Jacobson states: "They (the American Beverage Association) are trying to make it seem like it's their benevolence and self-restraint that were responsible for a decline and not the parents. . . ."

While we are in no position to judge the validity of the industry-sponsored study, it is clear that Jacobson unwittingly reveals the true solution to solving childhood obesity: better parenting - not more government regulations on food and beverage manufacturers.

Model legislation can be found on the CSPI Web site, so state legislators can easily limit the sales of soft drinks and junk foods in schools. In fact, the CSPI recommends that "school systems and other organizations catering to children . . . stop selling or advertising soft drinks, candy, and other junk foods in hallways, shops, and cafeterias."

Another protectionist group, the Institute of Medicine, alleges in a recent report requested by U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, that food company advertisements during children's television shows are leading children toward unhealthy snacks and, eventually, obesity. The report concludes that food and beverage marketing puts children's long-term health at risk.

Perhaps, but not if their parents make good choices.

While scientific research and common sense lead to the conclusion that over-consumption of carbonated soft drinks and junk food leads to obesity, the primary responsibility for children's health lies with their parents. When parents shirk that duty, government is put in the awkward, and highly improper, role of having to encourage good health through rules and regulations. If adults don't parent their children, the government will, to the detriment of the right of responsibility of people and businesses.

The American Obesity Association, a group that researches and educates on obesity, names the most important role model for children - and it's no fictional character, spokes-cartoon or product. The most important role model for children: parents. Parents, according to the AOA, can combat childhood obesity with two simple steps: create an active environment that limits TV time, and create a healthy eating environment that promotes healthy snacks and limits fast food.

If a 6-year-old child watching "Dora the Explorer" sees an advertisement for a candy bar, how does she eventually obtain it? Federal laws prevent the child from working and independently obtaining money. No convenience store is going to give the girl a candy bar free of charge. A vending machine at school could yield the unhealthy snack to the girl, but only if she inserts money into the machine.

The revelation here is that a parent or guardian must give the girl a candy bar, or the money to buy one.

A Coke isn't inherently bad, as long as it, like any other snack food, is consumed in moderation, and only as part of a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise and good nutrition. Parents can give their child a candy bar guilt-free as long as they make sure she plays outside after watching her cartoons, and if she eats her vegetables at dinner.

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