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Parents want junk food TV ad ban: survey

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An overwhelming majority of Australian parents believe junk food advertising is bad for their children's health and should be banned during popular viewing hours, a national survey has found.

But the government has stuck to its guns and maintained a ban would not help tackle the obesity epidemic.

More than 86 per cent of parents want a complete ban on advertising of unhealthy foods at times when children watch television, while almost 89 per cent believe stronger government-imposed restrictions on advertising are warranted.

The Queensland-health funded survey, which advocacy group Coalition on Food Advertising to Children commissioned an independent polling group to conduct, quizzed a random sample of 400 parents across Australia who have children under 14.

"The survey shows parents don't believe their kids are being protected from the onslaught of junk-food advertising on TV," Cancer Council NSW nutritionist and coalition chair Kathy Chapman said.

"These ads have been expertly designed to make kids want to eat more junk food, and we know they work."

The survey also found about three-quarters of parents were concerned that junk food companies use toys and other giveaways to market their unhealthy fare to children.

About two-thirds had reservations about schools and community organisations fundraising by selling unhealthy food, such as chocolate drives, and about the same number did not like junk food companies sponsoring children's sporting events.

"Of course parents are ultimately responsible to raise healthy children, but it's an uphill battle without stronger regulations," Ms Chapman said.

"Stopping junk-food ads when kids watch TV won't solve the obesity epidemic, but it's one way we can help children who are getting the wrong message about food."

Health Minister Tony Abbott's office played down the survey results and indicated they would not change the government's opposition to a ban.

"The government has ruled out banning so-called junk food advertising to children," a spokeswoman said.

"In the countries where there are bans, it hasn't worked."

But the Australian Medical Association said it was "common sense" that a ban would work.

"(Food manufacturers) are spending good money advertising in that timeslot and targeting advertising towards children," AMA vice president Dr Choong-Siew Yong said.

"It if didn't have an effect, why are they bothering to spend the money?"

Dr Yong said the absence of direct evidence was because the effect of a ban would be hard to measure directly.

He said the survey put paid to claims that parents wanted full responsibility for their children's viewing and eating habits.

The doctors' groups' main gripe is with advertising that targets children in a bid to make them pester parents into buying unhealthy food.

Dr Yong said about one quarter of Australian children were overweight or obese, and "our concern is that figure keeps getting higher and higher".

Australian children are estimated to get an average 40 per cent of their energy intake from junk food.

A study released last month found two-thirds of food advertisements during popular children's television programs promoted high fat and high sugar food - almost double the rate found during adult viewing hours.

Children were exposed to an average nine junk food ads an hour, the University of Sydney researchers found.


The broadcast watchdog, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), is reviewing television standards and the coalition is urging it to support a ban.

"We believe ACMA is obliged to respond to parents' concerns that junk-food companies are profiting at the expense of their children's health," Ms Chapman said.

Labor went to the last election with a policy to ban junk food advertising, but said it would announce its policies on advertising and junk food "in due course".

"Pester power is an area we're looking at," Opposition health spokeswoman Nicola Roxon said.

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