

Looking Ahead

Stop the Pop

While there is ample reason to be skeptical about claims of an obesity “epidemic” in America, there is also cause to believe that too many American children are too fat. About 9 million children in the U.S. are classified as obese by government standards. Since the 1970s, the incidence of childhood obesity has doubled for preschoolers and teenagers and more than tripled for children between the ages of six and eleven. This is clearly bad for their health: childhood obesity increases the risk of diabetes and the likelihood of continued obesity during adulthood, with all the personal and public costs of obesity-related chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease.

One of the culprits for the obesity rise seems to be food and beverage marketing aimed at children. A report published this year by the Institute of Medicine lays out some pertinent facts: more than \$10 billion per year is spent marketing food and drinks to kids, and “the preponderance of the products introduced and marketed to children and youth have been high in total calories, sugars, salt, and fat, and low in nutrients.”

For years, soft drinks have been readily available in schools, where children make dietary decisions without immediate parental supervision. And many schools have been more than happy to sell such products on their premises, since some of the profits have been kicked back to the schools to spend on things like new computers and books. So it is with great interest that we note the recent voluntary agreement among the nation’s three largest soft-drink companies—Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Cadbury Schweppes—to stop sales of all soft drinks to elementary and middle schools and to sell only diet sodas, low-calorie juices, and sports drinks in high schools. The agreement, instigated by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation as part of its Healthy Schools Program, will be implemented over the next three years and will ultimately affect some 35 million students. (The Alliance brings together former president Bill Clinton’s foundation and the American Heart Association; Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, a 2008 Republican presidential contender, is one of its leaders.)

Of course, it should be remembered that on any given school day, children get less than half of their caloric intake from eating and drinking at school. Obesity is a complex problem, and soft drinks and cafeteria food are less at fault than parents who fail to inculcate healthy dietary habits in their children. And with many schools reducing their physical education requirements and millions of American kids spending their free time in sedentary activities like watching television, playing video games, or surfing the Web, it is clear that food and beverage producers only deserve a portion of the blame for the obesity problem. Perhaps the industry will see this voluntary moratorium as a chance for creative marketing of more nutritious products. Yet we would be foolish to believe that corporate responsibility rather than parental responsibility is the key to keeping our children healthy.