

Remarks to the Children Now Forum

Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate

July 20, 2006

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Thanks to Ted Lempert and the entire Children Now organization for the invitation to participate in this forum, and particularly to Patti Miller for her work in keeping me and my staff informed about so many important children's issues. I understand that this is to be the first of several forums discussing the impact of media on children, and I hope that I can participate in as many of these as I am able.

I have said many times that our children's minds are our nation's greatest natural resource. Those minds are shaped in large part by the media. In recent years, experts and public officials and parents have spent a lot of time talking about the content to which our children are exposed. It's very important that we – as a society – continue to look for ways to make sure that media can be a positive force in our children's lives.

As critical as we all can sometimes be of what's on television and the Internet in today's world, the fact of the matter is that there are a number of programs that not only entertain but also educate and even inspire our children. "Sesame Street" – on the air now for 36 seasons and having won 108 Emmy awards – has influenced hundreds of millions of children in more than 120 countries. "Barney," "Mr. Rogers," "Reading Rainbow," "Blues Clues," "Dora the Explorer," my own kids cited "Wishbone" as one of their favorites growing up – whether still shown or through repeats and DVDs, these programs and many others have influenced our children's minds for the better.

I say this because I come here today to praise media – not to bury it. We are not here necessarily to fight the influence of media on our children – but to make it work for us. Here are just some of the things we can do:

- Give parents more choice in the content that comes in to their homes. Parents need to be given the tools necessary to monitor and control the content that comes into their home, and they need to be taught how to use those tools.
- We need to encourage the production of more and better quality children's programming. With new technology like multi-casting, Video on Demand, and even television shows available for download off the Internet, there's going to be even more opportunity for children's television programs to be seen. But *quality* children's television is expensive to produce. We need to create an environment that encourages the production of educational, inspiring children's programming and not allow these new means of delivering content to become cluttered with poorly-produced "junk" programming.
- Our children also need to learn to watch TV. That may seem like a ridiculous statement – as we all know, they seem pretty good at it! The truth is, however, that for television and media to have a positive effect, children can't just sit in front of a screen, they have to know how to actively engage the material they are watching. They must learn to

distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction, what is information and what is persuasion.

It's that last point that segues nicely into the topic of today's forum: advertising. While many parents pay a great deal of attention to the programs their children watch, they may not realize that they should also be thinking about the advertising on those programs. However, even if parents aren't paying attention to advertising targeting their children, the marketing industry is. According to a story earlier this year in the *Wall Street Journal*, the children's advertising market is valued at between \$800 and \$900 million. Some of the biggest players in that market are food manufacturers such as General Mills and Kellogg.

Children are voracious consumers and they are persistent advocates (as anyone who has been subjected to child's efforts to get a new cereal or a new kind of candy they've seen on television can tell you). It's perfectly understandable that advertisers would target them – but it may not be entirely fair. According to recent research, most children can't distinguish between programs and commercials until they are 4 or 5 years old. In addition, it is not until children are 7 or 8 years old that they are able to understand that advertising is designed to persuade – until that age they often accept advertisements as fact.

The problem is that this cognitive ability combined with the prevalence of unhealthy foods and a more sedentary lifestyle have created a perfect storm that has made childhood obesity a nationwide problem. According to the CDC, the prevalence of overweight 6 to 11 year-olds has increased from 7% in 1980 to 18.8% in 2004. More than 17% of 12 to 19 year-olds are considered overweight. The rate of growth is frankly frightening. These children are at greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleeping problems, and social and psychological problems that come from the stigmatization and poor self-esteem that can accompany weight problems. In addition, childhood obesity has contributed to a substantial increase in the number of children with Type 2 diabetes – a form of diabetes that was almost unheard of in children as recently as a decade ago.

Studies that try to identify just how much influence media has on the childhood obesity problem can provide us with a great deal of insight. In studying these particular issues, we can find research that may draw different conclusions about the specific number of hours children watch TV, the total number of food advertisements they may see, or the number of hours they spend in some type of physical activity. While we may disagree on the accuracy of any one study, what I think we all can agree on is that, whatever the specific numbers are, our children are less active and more overweight and therefore less healthy than ever before. Simply put, childhood obesity is an epidemic. However, the good news is that we all want to do something about it.

Many of you have been working on these issues for decades. Since coming to the FCC, I have had the opportunity to meet with executives from Disney, Nickelodeon, and PBS to discuss the influence of media on children. Just this past week, I spoke to Wally Snyder, President of the American Advertising Federation and someone with a history of being a champion for children, and representatives from the Grocery Manufacturers Association. I've met Dale Kunkel from the University of Arizona and Angela Campbell from Georgetown and been briefed on the important work they are doing in this field. In short, I have had an opportunity to talk to so many people in a wide cross-section of

fields who are dedicated to the health and well-being of children. It truly is inspiring to see so much commitment to this cause from so many.

As you know, much of my former life included working on issues from better schools to raising childhood immunization rates to representing neglected and abused children. Just like those issues, childhood obesity has not only immediate harmful effects but has long term and serious implications in the future for these children as they grow into adults. There will also be increased cost and burden to our entire healthcare system – everything from private insurance to public Medicaid programs will face additional costs as well.

However, after years in the public policy arena, I **am** impressed with the commitment by all of you and your organizations – plus so many sectors of business – to join together and act. Most public policy issues are not solved by one sector or with one solution. And that is why it is so important to have all of you – and even more entities out there – committed to doing even more.

The ideas and actions are just as varied as the organizations.

Disney recently announced that it would not renew much of its promotional relationship with McDonalds out of concern for childhood obesity. Disney is not condemning McDonalds through this decision, but it is recognizing that advertising that appeals to kids can have a powerful effect. I also recently had a chance to watch some examples of Disney programs which include positive messages about healthy eating and exercise – using popular characters as role models for children.

Nickelodeon has also taken up the cause of fighting childhood obesity. The network recently announced it was committing \$30 million this year to a partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation to develop a comprehensive media and public awareness campaign. Nickelodeon also has devoted considerable resources to its “Let’s Just Play” initiative – a program that encourages kids to socialize with other kids and not just sit in front of the television. This initiative is marked by the annual Worldwide Day of Play, where the network goes dark for 3 hours to encourage kids to get up from in front of the TV and go out and play.

General Mills has converted its cereal lines to whole grains and launched a campaign to encourage kids to eat a healthy breakfast. PepsiCo and many other companies are packaging food in smaller, healthier portions and has launched healthy snack public service announcements at 3 PM – right when kids are getting home from school and looking for something to eat. The Ad Council is working on a national media literacy campaign to help kids and parents become more critical viewers of advertising messages. Vanderbilt Med students have created a program called Girlforce that targets low-income middle schoolers and encourages exercise and good nutrition. And there are hundreds of local programs all over America – from the Adams Park Community Center in St. Louis to the Watertown NY Family YMCA.

Yes, there are problems out there – and maybe a few bad actors. Advertising in the form of online games that promote products, product placements in movies and television shows, and other, more subtle means of advertising represent a kind of stealth marketing that may be harder for parents to control and counter. However, while we should work to address these concerns, let’s not demonize any one industry. This is an issue where everyone recognizes that we have to pull together to help children – and many are trying to do something positive.

Oreo cookies and Captain Crunch cereal are not inherently bad. My one request of everyone here is that this discussion not degenerate into an “us against them” mentality that seems to accompany so many issues we discuss in Washington. We have seen a coalition of children’s advocates and industry recently reach an accord on the children’s television obligations of digital broadcasters – which I hope the FCC will address very soon. I believe we can see similar cooperation here with even more participants from the advertising and marketing companies to the food and beverage industry to health, education, and communications policy makers.

But it takes awhile to change our mindset, our habits, our lifestyles. So, that's why the focus of this forum and the work of all of you here today and all those who are part of this army against obesity across America is so vitally important. All of us must recommit ourselves – in whatever way possible – to encourage government leaders, every school and community, every sector of media, advertising and food industry, our educational institutions and, yes, every parent to realize that this is an epidemic. But an epidemic with a cure: a commitment to change.

I believe that you have a group of people at the Commission who are engaged, knowledgeable, and, maybe most importantly, who are parents, who care deeply about these issues. Improving the quality of life for children and families is my number one goal while at the FCC, and I will offer to host, facilitate, speak out, or cheerlead you in this effort to end obesity and make our country the healthiest place in the world for children to live and grow into our next generation of leaders, of inventors, of artists. They deserve no less.