

Remarks of Chairman Martin at the
Childhood Obesity Task Force Meeting

March 21, 2007

Thank you, Senator Brownback, for hosting us here today. I appreciate your leadership and that of Senator Harkin on this very important issue.

In recent years the rate of childhood obesity has gone in only one direction and that is up. And the concern of parents, medical experts and public officials has risen as well.

We cannot hope to truly address this problem however, without the participation of the media, advertisers and the food and beverage industry. And to that end, I am so very pleased to see everyone assembled here today.

Childhood Obesity has gone from a national problem to a point of crisis. Last September, the Institute of Medicine found that one-third of American children are either obese or at risk for obesity.

This is consistent with the Center for Disease Control's finding that since 1980 the number of overweight children ages 6-11 has doubled and the number of overweight adolescents has tripled.

To quote the American Academy of Pediatrics, the trends of children becoming overweight and inactive "pose an unprecedented burden in terms of children's health as well as present and future health care costs."

As a parent, I already know the enormous influence the media has on our children. Its impact can't really be overstated.

According to Nielsen Media Research (for the 2004-2005 season), an average American Household has the television turned on more than 8 hours a day with children watching between 2 and 4 hours daily. And recent studies have found that even the youngest children are highly exposed to television. Almost one-half (43 percent) of children under two watch TV every day.

One quarter (26 percent) of them even have a television in their bedroom. The Kaiser Foundation also found that by the time they enter the first grade, kids will have spent the equivalent of three school years in front of the TV.

In the Children's Television Act, Congress noted that, by the time the average child is 18 years old, he or she has spent between 10,000 to 15,000 hours watching television and has been exposed to more than 200,000 commercials. Congress also noted that it is well established by scientific research that children are uniquely susceptible to the persuasive messages contained in television advertising.

The Kaiser Family Foundation also found that children under 6 cannot distinguish between programming content and advertising. In addition, these kids cannot weed out the marketing messages from their favorite show, especially when the ad campaigns feature favorite TV characters like Sponge Bob and Scooby-Doo.

Congress anticipated that children would be particularly susceptible to advertising and thus put certain protections in place. Indeed, in the Children's Television Act, Congress enacted specific limits on the amount of advertising that could be shown during children's programming. The Children's Television Act requires that commercial TV broadcasters and cable operators limit the amount of commercials in children's programs to no more than 10 ½ minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays. These limits apply to all digital video programming,

including both broadcasting and subscription channels, directed to children 12 and under.

The Commission's rules also require the separation of programming content from commercial material with a "bumper." Finally, our rules prohibit program characters and show hosts from being featured in commercials run during the program in which they appear.

Parents of course are the first line of defense. But we in government and in industry must make sure they have the tools they need to ensure their children's welfare. According to a recent study published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, two important ways to reduce childhood obesity are for parents to become more aware of children's nutritional needs and to reduce the amount of time their children spend watching television.

Judging by the enormous response to the creation of this Task Force, I know that these facts and figures about childhood obesity are a concern to many in the media, in advertising and in the food and beverage industry as well.

I salute the steps various food and beverage and media companies have already taken to address this issue. For example, some food and beverage producers have responded by reformulating products to better comply with nutritional guidelines. It has also been encouraging to hear some broadcasters being selective about the types of ads targeting children they will accept.

Members of this Task Force have put forward initiative of their own:

- * Disney's "Healthy Kids Initiative" uses their characters to introduce healthy living and eating themes
- * Coke's "Live it" program for middle school kids and

“Triple Play” an after school initiative, works to teach kids both healthy food choices and physical fitness.

* PepsiCo offers a variety of healthy drinks and waters and has recently joined in a voluntary agreement with Kraft, Campbell’s Soup and others to only offer healthy options and portions in America’s schools.

* General Mills is working to promote portion control by offering those manageable 100-calorie packages and many community based programs to promote healthy living.

* McDonald’s now offers a healthier version of the ever popular “Happy Meal” that substitutes apple slices for fries and low fat milk for sugary drinks. And they have announced plans to remove the use of oils containing trans-fats from food preparation.

This task force is founded on the notion that we all have a responsibility to promote and protect our children’s welfare.

It is my hope that the participants will produce specific guidelines to tackle the crisis of childhood obesity. By committing to follow a set of guidelines, the Task Force participants can foster habits that will promote healthier living and encourage others in your industries to follow your example for the benefit of our children.

Again, I appreciate Senator Brownback and Harkin’s leadership on this issue as well as that of my fellow commissioners.

I look forward in the coming months to honest and perhaps even spirited discussion of where we are and where we are going with this national epidemic. Thank you!