

# Sugar reduction in products targeted at children: Why are we not there yet?

Ana Laura Velázquez<sup>1</sup>, Leticia Vidal<sup>1</sup>, Paula Varela<sup>2</sup>, Gastón Ares<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidad de la República, Uruguay; <sup>2</sup> Nofima AS, Norway

## BACKGROUND

Children's diets worldwide are far from optimal. Children do not consume enough fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods they need and consume an excess of products high in sugar, saturated fat, and sodium. In particular, sugar intake among children has raised concern worldwide as it exceeds nutritional recommendations. Sugar contributes to the daily energy intake and has been associated with numerous negative health outcomes. Excessive consumption of sugar has also been linked to altered emotional processing, anxiety and depression.

The great majority of products targeted at children available in the market are high in sugar, which is frequently higher than that of products targeted at the non-children population. These products have been identified as the main source of sugar in children's diets. The major contribution of processed products to children's sugar intake suggests that product reformulation is one of the cost-effective strategies that can be implemented to reduce sugar intake at the population level.

The aim of the present was to critically discuss the role of the food industry in contributing to children's excessive sugar intake worldwide and the strategies that have so far been encouraged or implemented to revert this situation.

## KEY FINDINGS

Reformulation of products targeted at children has been reported to be a feasible way to reduce children's sugar intake. Recent studies have shown that the general belief that children may prefer excessively sweet products may not be completely true. The sugar content of commercial beverages and dairy products p can be reduced 20-40% without negatively

affecting children's liking. However, gradual and progressive reductions may contribute to minimize any potential negative reactions towards sugar reduction.

So far, most sugar reduction efforts have focused on maintaining the sweetness level of the products through the use of non-nutritive sweeteners. This strategy does not only contribute to a reaffirmation of children's preference for highly sweet products, it may also hinder the potential of alternatives that target at modifying children's preferences by reducing the exposure to sweet taste. Emerging evidence on the metabolic role of sweetness and the potential negative health effects of non-nutritive sweeteners, further stresses the need to reduce both sugar content and sweetness intensity.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although it may seem harmless, manufacture and marketing of products targeted at children with excessive content of sugar can be regarded as a breach to some of the principles of the convention of the rights of the child. International experience suggests that relying on the commitment of the food industry to reduce the sugar content of products targeted at children may not be enough. Governmental action seems necessary to achieve a substantial sugar reduction. For this purpose, a multicomponent sugar reduction strategy including taxation of food and beverages with added sugar, restriction of availability of poor nutrient quality products in schools, restrictions of marketing strategies targeted at children, front-of package labeling and reformulation of food products is recommended. Co-creation of low-sugar products with children and adolescents is another interesting avenue for further research, which may contribute to the development of more innovative healthy products.

We advocate for a change in how products targeted at children are conceptualized, highlighting the need to adopt a child-rights view. Food scientists should take into account the best interests of children when engaging in the development of products targeted at them, avoiding high content of sugar, as well as the use of any ingredient with potential negative effects on their health and wellbeing. We encourage food scientists to promote a new approach to sugar reduction by putting aside the premise of avoiding changes in the sensory characteristics of products and focusing on reducing both sugar content and sweetness intensity.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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