



Submission by the Children's Rights Alliance to the National Task Force on Obesity May 2004

INTRODUCTION

The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the National Task Force on Obesity in relation to the development of a national strategy to halt the rise and reverse the prevalence of obesity in Irish children and adults.

The Alliance is a coalition of seventy-six non-governmental organisations concerned with meeting the needs and safeguarding the rights of children in Ireland. The aim of the Alliance is to secure the full implementation in the Republic of Ireland of the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Alliance would like to commend the Task Force on their efforts to consult with interested groups and the general public. It strongly urges the Task Force to engage in consultation with children and young people in the development of the national strategy. Such consultation is in keeping with the requirements of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

"State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

Undertaking consultation is also in keeping with the requirements of Goal One of the National Children's Strategy, which states that

"Children will have a voice in matters that affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity."

The National Children's Office undertook extensive consultation with children when formulating the National Children's Strategy, as have the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland in their development of a Children's Advertising Code.

ALLIANCE POLICIES AND INITIATIVES THAT ARE CURRENTLY PROMOTING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obligates States to 'recognise the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of

health....” Under this Article, and arising from the overall requirements of the Convention, the State is obliged to take action to promote the health of children and to ensure that institutions and agencies do not by their actions damage children’s health. Since its establishment in 1995 the Alliance has accorded particular importance to promoting the implementation of this article.

The threat to children's health from obesity is a real one. The price can be a lifetime's legacy of poor health and significantly reduced life expectancy. Until relatively recently, Type 2 diabetes was almost exclusively a disease found in the 50-80 year age group. Now children as young as 12 are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

There are also important social and psychological consequences for these children. They can suffer adverse psychological effects such as poor self-esteem, poor social skills leading to social isolation and they are frequent targets of bullies.

The Alliance and its member organisations have worked to influence policy and raise public awareness in relation to this problem in the context of debates around diet and nutrition, play and recreation opportunities for children, equitable access to health care, child poverty and adequate social supports for families. The Alliance has used publications, policy submissions to Government Departments and public statements, all of which have been released to the media, to publicise the pertinent issues.

Play and Recreation: The Alliance called for and contributed to the development of a National Play Policy and a National Recreation Policy to ensure that the play and recreation needs of all children, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances or physical status, are fully met.

Ban on Advertising Junk Food: In two detailed submissions to the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland in relation to the development of the Children’s Advertising Code, the Alliance called for a ban on the advertising of junk food.

In these submissions the Alliance highlighted that the type of food that is promoted in advertising is greatly at variance with the requirements of a nutritious diet, as recommended by public health experts. Themes of fun and fantasy or taste, rather than health and nutrition, are used to promote junk food to children. Advertisements show unhealthy foods in the best possible light. Fatty and sugary foods are associated with popularity, happy playground relationships and sporting success. In contrast, foods that feature in diets recommended by nutritionists get little promotional support through advertising. The Alliance took the position that since there is convincing evidence that the marketing of energy-dense, micronutrient-poor foods contributes to obesity, there should be a ban on junk food advertising.

ANY FUTURE POLICIES AND INITIATIVES THAT IT WOULD CONSIDER TO PROMOTE THESE SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Alliance Priority: In its recent strategic review, the Alliance has ranked children’s health issues as one of its priorities for the next three years. In this context it will continue to address the issue of childhood obesity through its publications, policy submissions and public statements. It will approach the issue from a children’s right to the highest attainable standard of health.

UN Second Report: In the immediate future, the Alliance, in consultation with its member organisations, will prepare a second “shadow” report on the implementation

of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Ireland.¹ The Alliance's Second Report will focus on the government's approach to Article 24 and highlight amongst others the issues of obesity.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Providing Resources in the Health Services: Childhood obesity is an avoidable condition. Within the health services there is a need for screening in the early years to identify those at risk and a complementary need for increased investment in services to ensure those identified can access appropriate supports and services. The Alliance recognises that this will require the allocation of additional resources. These expenditures, however, will pay for themselves over time through reduced demand for services and treatment for health problems in later years arising from a failure to address obesity during childhood now.

Implementing Joined Up Government: Tackling obesity through the health services will only address some of the problem. Social, economic and environmental factors are the main external or structural determinants of health. Ministers and senior public official in a range of departments, including Environment, Education and Science, Transport and Finance, as well as Health and Children, will need to coordinate their efforts effectively.

“Government programmes and policies need to increase investment in families and children particularly in the early years, promote community development approaches, improve healthy lifestyle opportunities for children and families in schools and in the community.”²

It should be noted that the highest overall prevalence of obesity is among those with no education, only primary education or only some secondary education.³

Avoiding Duplication of Existing Strategies and Initiatives: Duplication of strategies and initiatives developed by the various Departments must be avoided. Instead we must complement those already in existence. The Alliance supports the objectives laid down under the Strategic Aim of the Health Promotion Strategy “to support the development of partnerships with families and relevant bodies to promote a holistic approach to the physical and well being of children.”⁴

Overcoming Strong Financial Commercial Interests: Government must not give way to the strong vested interests of the food industries should regulatory action be needed to curtail the food industries commercial activities.

¹ The Irish Government will be filing its combined Second and Third National Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child by 27 October 2004.

² “*Childhood obesity now a public health epidemic*”, Celia Keenaghan, Principal Research Officer at the Programme of Action for Children, HeBE, Irish Independent 09/03/04

³ “*Annual Report 2003*”, National Nutrition Surveillance Centre,

⁴ “*The National Health Promotion Strategy 2000-2005*”, Department of Health and Children