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Soda In America: Children And Families



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May 5, 2010

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This week, we're examining soda in America, and today, a look at children and families. Michele Norris talks with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack about his goals for nutrition standards in schools, about the choices he hopes young people and their families will learn to make, and about his own soda habits. She also speaks with community health activist Nura Green of the Aban Institute about the challenges children and families face in urban environments, where there are few healthy choices.

Transcript

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ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. Im Robert Siegel.

MICHELE NORRIS, host:

And Im Michele Norris.

(Soundbite of popping can and fizzing)

NORRIS: And now, part two of our examination of soda in America. Today, we're focusing on children and families.

(Soundbite of a Coca-Cola ad)

Unidentified Woman: (Singing) I'd like to teach the world to sing - sing with me - in perfect harmony, perfect harmony. I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company. Thats the real thing...

NORRIS: This iconic Coca-Cola ad featuring happy, healthy youth of all different backgrounds, debuted on American television in 1971. Well, fast forward four decades and here's the TV spot the American Beverage Association is running now on behalf of Coke, Pepsi and other soda makers.

(Soundbite of an American Beverage Association ad)

Unidentified Man: America's beverage companies have removed full-calorie soft drinks from schools, reducing beverage calories by 88 percent. Together with schools, we're helping kids make more balanced choices every day.

NORRIS: As child obesity rates have skyrocketed, more and more attention is being paid to what

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kids are consuming. And the move by the beverage industry to take high-calorie options out of schools is only one part of a bigger movement. More than two dozen states now have laws restricting the sale of soft drinks in school buildings, but how far they go varies from state to state.

On the federal level, Congress is set to debate the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act. The bill would allow the U.S. Department of Agriculture to set new nutrition standards for schools, and that could mean an end to sugary drinks in schools nationwide.

Now, we should point out soda makers wouldn't be taking a big hit here: school sales account for less than one percent of their overall market. It's schools that have traditionally relied on income from those vending machines.

Still, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack says it's important to get kids on the right track. I asked him whether he could see allowing only water, milk and juice in schools.

Secretary TOM VILSACK (Department of Agriculture): Well, that may very well happen in elementary schools and middle schools in particular. High school students obviously have a lot of choices. They have the capacity to leave campus at times and so there are a multitude of choices that they have.

I think the key for us is to make sure that we do a good job of educating young people and their parents about precisely what is being served in schools. I think the more educated parents become, the more educated youngsters become about their food choices, the more informed choices they're going to make. And as we do, I think we're going to be better consumers and I think healthier consumers.

NORRIS: The Institute of Medicine came up with recommendations for nutrition standards in the schools. They're pretty strict. For instance, in high schools they recommend only beverages with fewer than five calories per portion. They recommend no carbonated or flavored waters, no sports drinks except for students who are engaging in some sort of vigorous physical activity for more than an hour.

How doable is this in schools to limit those choices, and then also to make sure that, for instance, that students only have access to certain drinks if they're physically active?

Secretary VILSACK: Well, I think it is doable. You know, you often hear school administrators express concern about budgets and the fact that if there isn't a wide range of choices in the vending machines, they may not be able to generate as much money for the pep club or some other school activity. But our research has shown that if you give youngsters healthy choices, they're going to make those choices.

So it's not necessarily going to reflect in a decline in vending machine receipts, it's just going to result in a different set of choices being made by young people.

NORRIS: What do you do, though, to make sure that this is consistent at home? Because if you're offering a healthy array of choices at school but then the students go home where there is a giant liter of soda on the dinner table every night, or sometimes even at the breakfast table, it seems like that could undermine what's going on during the school day.

Secretary VILSACK: Well, I mean, first of all you have to understand that for a lot of youngsters, maybe 50 percent of the calories they consume are consumed in these school meals. So you can have a profound impact on just changing the school environment. And in providing parents more educational information about what their youngsters are eating at school, I think it's a way of encouraging parents to become more engaged and more involved to the extent they can in their choices at home.

So that puts the burden not just on parents but it puts the burden on marketers, it puts the burden on grocery stores, it puts the burden on food processing folks to figure out ways in which we can provide more nutritious food and make it easier for parents to make the right set of choices.

So, for example, in grocery stores across the country they're looking at systems in which they can tell you very quickly which of the choices that you have in the aisle is the most nutritious. There's a program called NuVal, for example, that's being used in grocery stores in my home state of Iowa that basically will give you a number from one to a hundred, a hundred being the most nutritious, one being the least nutritious.

It is a culture change. It is a culture shift. It takes time. But I think at the end of the day, you can't berate people. You have to encourage folks. You have to make sure they understand not only

whats in for their children, but whats in it for their country. We can't have a third of our youngsters being obese. If we do, we're going to see substantial increased costs in health care. We're going to see youngsters who can't perform at the top of their game. And the country suffers.

NORRIS: In so many parts of the world, families spend hours every day trying to get access to clean water. But in this country it's sometimes difficult to get young people to reach for water. They say, you know, water, why would be want that when we can have something thats sweet? How do you make water more attractive to young people?

Secretary VILSACK: Well, first and foremost, in rural areas we're trying to make sure that there is access to clean water. In terms of making it the choice, I think the more people encourage that - there can be public service announcements, there can be modeling of that behavior by adults. I mean, youngsters pick up a lot of what their parents do. You're beginning to see more and more folks carrying water bottles around and drinking water. If folks understand and appreciate the extraordinary replenishing nature of just plain old water, they're going to drink more of it.

NORRIS: In the spirit of the old adage: Let it begin with me - what have you done to change your beverage habits? Do you reach for less soda now?

Secretary VILSACK: I do. At Lent, I gave up the diet sodas. And while I now drink an occasional soda, I dont drink anywhere near as much as what I did before Lent, Ill tell you that, and before I got into this job.

Im drinking a lot more water. On my runs - I run three, four, sometimes five days a week, I used to take sports drinks to sort of during the course of a long run - five, six, eight, 10 miles. I dont do that anymore. I take water. And it's hard, you know. When you're 59 years old...

(Soundbite of laughter)

Secretary VILSACK: ...it's not easy to change your habits. But I've got a grandson, a nine month old grandson, and I want to make sure that Im around to see his successes.

NORRIS: Thats Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. He got me thinking about what might lead more Americans to start making choices like the one he's made. I headed out to southeast D.C. I visited a neighborhood of tidy working-class homes that also had its share of urban decay, and I met up with a couple of school kids at the Riverside Center, a community space for children.

Dayquan Tollen(ph) is 14, and I asked him how much soda he drinks.

Mr. DAYQUAN TOLLEN: We drink it in the morning. We wont be having orange juice or anything, so you drink a little bit of soda in the morning, get us woke up so we could walk to school and stuff. In the afternoon, for an afternoon snack and for dinner if we dont have juice.

NORRIS: What about water?

Mr. TOLLEN: Water, it dont agree with my stomach if I ain't eat nothing before I drink water. So it messes with my stomach in the morning. So I have to have something with flavor.

NORRIS: That's Dayquan Tollen. Now, Sidney Bryant(ph) who's also 14, told me she and her friends recently made a pact to give up soda. She's been trying to convert her family, all five sisters and three brothers.

Ms. SIDNEY BRYANT: I told my mother every time, go to the store and get packs of water or get water instead of soda. Cause before, we used to go through like 12 counts of six soda cases in one day. And then one day, I just realized that and it was like that was unacceptable. So I told my mother to go out and buy water, so we've been drinking more water now.

NORRIS: Did it take convincing?

Ms. BRYANT: Yes.

NORRIS: How'd you do that?

Ms. BRYANT: I told them that if they keep drinking soda like that, then everybody is going to get unhealthy. And since there's nine of us, I didnt want that to be a risk factor to their health. So, I decided that they had to change.

NORRIS: Sidney Bryant may have helped convince Dayquan, too. As we were leaving, he said

he'd try to drink more water.

Now, just outside Riverside Center, there's a liquor store, a carryout and a corner store. The closest full-sized grocery store is a couple of miles away. The area is what community health activist Nura Green calls a Food Desert.

Ms. NURA GREEN (Community Health Activist): Where are you going to purchase healthy food? There's no real sense of healthy food. That's slowly changing.

NORRIS: Slowly changing. We sit down in Marvin Gaye Park, a new oasis of greenery and community art in what's been a sketchy neighborhood for years. Nura Green grew up nearby. She now teaches people here about the risks of diabetes and the importance of exercise. She herself likes roller skating. She also teaches people how to eat better.

Ms. GREEN: We were doing a presentation on health and reading labels. I was like, well, who had breakfast this morning? Who had a healthy breakfast? And a young man said, oh, I did. I said oh, really? I said, so tell me, what did you have? He said, I had pineapple soda. And he was very proud to say that he had pineapple soda. He's like, yeah, pineapple.

I said, well, yes, pineapple, but let's see about that pineapple soda. One, it's a soda, so it's a sugary beverage. Two, it doesn't even have the original pineapple in it at all, other than the name pineapple. And once I broke that down to him, he kind of sat back and looked, and he thought about it. You could see the, you know, the mechanism going on in his head like, well, how did that happen? And so, it's now up to us to really educate kids.

NORRIS: Who has the real responsibility here? Is it the storekeeper? Is it the school, to get the sodas out of the school building? Is it the parents to make sure that they're not purchasing so much soda and keeping it in the cupboard or the refrigerator?

Ms. GREEN: We all bear responsibility. We are equally responsible to ensure that the products are there that are needed. The store owner, you know, they're in business to make money. If it's profitable to them and enough folks say, look, we want this, they'll do it. But they also are there to make money. So if you have a dollar for a soda and \$2 for a health drink, what's the choice is going to be made? The easy choice is go for the dollar drink.

There are several initiatives to get healthier food in the corner stores, and there has to be a drive towards that. And I'm happy to say that there is a groundswell for that activity to occur.

NORRIS: So it's in process. We're on the way to something.

Ms. GREEN: We're on the way to something. We're not quite there yet, though, because we have a huge problem.

NORRIS: When you drive around the community, you see a group of kids, they're having a great time, it's after school, they're talking about the things that kids talk about, their heads are thrown back in laughter, and almost every single one of them has a soda in their hand, what goes through your mind?

Ms. GREEN: I wish one had water. If one of them had water, it would make all the difference. All one person has to do is make the change, and I don't even want to say juice, just water because I think that makes all the difference.

NORRIS: That's Nura Green, director of the Aban Institute, a local community organization. In the next few weeks, we hear that Coke and Pepsi, along with other food and beverage companies, will be announcing another voluntary agreement, this time to reduce calories in the marketplace. They're talking about reformulating their products and their portion sizes and coming up with some new products.

While Secretary Vilsack says he's encouraged by the contributions the industry is making, others are a bit more skeptical. Many worry about the ways the industry targets children with their marketing. Others worry about the growing popularity of things like vitamin water and iced teas. They sound healthy but pack almost as many calories as soda.

As early as next year, calorie information will have to be displayed in many restaurants and on vending machines. That's part of the new health care law. But will that stop people from reaching for their favorite beverages or snacks? Food for thought.

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Recent First



david bockoven (davy_B) wrote:
Norm Washington:

Sorry to contradict, but you are inaccurate that mineral water/fruit juice blends have "no sugars whatever." To the exact contrary, fruit juices of this sort (often but not always apple) have been squeezed and strained so much that the primary stuff left is fruit sugar with some remaining natural pigments.

What do you think makes fruit sweet? It's sugar! Much of it is in the form of "fruit sugar," aka *fructose.* (Remember that the problem with corn syrup - apart from simple calories - is that it is "high fructose.") Some of the other sugars present in the fruit which are refined into juice include sucrose ("table sugar") and glucose ("blood sugar"/honey).

Fruit sugar isn't intrinsically bad. When it comes in fruit, it is a well-balanced component of good nutrition. But converting fruit into fruit juice removes many of its nutrients. In general, early child development experts advise against juice for kids - it is much less nutritious than whole fruit. It is essentially empty calories which damage the teeth.

Basically, juice boils down to a "natural" form of sugar water marketed to you as a convenient way to get your daily fruit.

Stick to plain mineral water, even flavored, if you must spend your money.

Thursday, May 06, 2010 9:30:15 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**david bockoven (davy_B)** wrote:

David Huffine:

Your reasoning about diet soda and its zero calories is most reasonable. However, there have been studies published and duplicated literally for decades, showing that regular, daily imbibers of diet sodas are as a group overweight and obese.

Their problem is unlike that of the excess calories delivered by regular sugary sodas. It appears that they are often people with weight problems who take the ineffective step of trying to control their weight problems by eliminating the sugar in soda. They delude themselves this way, since the other problematic elements of their calorie:activity ratio remains unaffected.

This is separate from the present issue, in which a great increase in the drinking of soda by people without independent weight problems has led to new obesity problems. These are not the same old fat people; these are additional, newly fat people. The 100 or two calories of soda each day have been added to the previous balance in their intake, and added up, inexorably, month after month, until they have collected many extra pounds.

Bottom line: Diet soda is also a source of unmitigated weight problems, but for different people through different dynamics for different reasons. Sorry.

Thursday, May 06, 2010 9:13:54 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**Norm Washington (over_sees)** wrote:

By the way, these mineral water/juice products are also sold by Coca-cola in Germany#

Thursday, May 06, 2010 3:46:11 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**Norm Washington (over_sees)** wrote:

One possible possibility to help kids make a change from cola, is for the cola companies to offer carbonated mineral water/juice mixtures, like what is sold in Germany. It is somewhat sweet but contains no sugars whatever. It is about 30-40% Juice (Apple being the most available) and the rest is carbonated mineral water. It cost the same as a cola, has less calories and is not as heavy as pure juice. It is also refreshing.

Thursday, May 06, 2010 3:43:22 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**George Swartz (Peel)** wrote:

recently finished a catchy children's song called "Water is Your Friend" that might help:

Water is your friend, kids
soda pop is not
though it may seem delicious
your teeth will surely rot
so unless you miss your dentist
don't drink Coke a lot
'cause water is your friend, kids
soda pop is not

Thursday, May 06, 2010 1:26:34 AM

[Recommend \(3\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**David Huffine (classical_dave)** wrote:

Secretary Vilsack has laudable goals I'm sure, but he like so many other crusaders goes one step too far. Limiting the sugary soda intake I'm sure would do wonders for helping to control obesity and all of its related health problems. BUT, I believe I heard him indicate wanting to limit diet soda as well. You see? Just that one step too far. I checked the label on my diet Coke, and there are zero calories. Yes, I'm sure there are some ingredients in there that are not all that good for me. Tough! That's my choice. I've lived more years (64) than Secretary Vilsack, and I'm pretty healthy. This is exactly what the Democrats don't need, someone in the President's team trying to be the food police. You can bet that's what the Republicans will say. NPR, keep these interesting features coming.

Thursday, May 06, 2010 12:24:56 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑

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Janet Lafler (JanetL) wrote:

@Vicki Broughton -- I'm sorry that you find other people expressing opinions to be coercive.
Thursday, May 06, 2010 12:05:59 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑

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Victor Reyes (Vagung) wrote:

Public health could sove this. Let's get better about teaching nutrition than that stupid pyramid. Just have all kids take nutrition courses that teach about moderation and the health effects of too much of anything (fat, sugar, etc).

Wednesday, May 05, 2010 10:57:20 PM

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Bill Harbin (Bill1968) wrote:

Recently children and families have been betrayed by their family doctors on the issue of soda and sugary drinks. The American Academy of Family Phycsians made a "partnership" deal with Coca Cola company to "improve consumer education" on the issue of soda and health. You can read the AAFP's statement at <http://www.aafp.org/online/en/home/publications/news/news-now/inside-aafp/20091006cons-alli-coke.html>

For the money they recieved from Coca Cola, the AAFP has placed advertisements on their consumer site that come up on any page that adresses sugar. You can see for yourself at <http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/healthy/food/general-nutrition/1005.html>

The sad fact is this; the soft drink industry is very very rich and our primary care doctors are not. And now they have let money interfere in their ability to advocate for their paitent's health.

Wednesday, May 05, 2010 10:55:20 PM

[Recommend \(1\)](#) ↑

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david bockoven (davy_B) wrote:

What should one do with those people who, through either "personal irresponsibility" or "dysfunction," have failed to "get a clue?" For some reason, they failed to learn things which others of us found obvious.

In the context of our present complex society, these people are a real drag on the system. They not only create misery for themselves, but reduced productivity for the rest of us. One may salve one's own righteousness with indignation at their failures, but the fact is that there are strongly supported, detailed data explaining how they failed *and how it can be corrected!*

What would Jesus do, with these, the least among us? Tell them they have been taught how to fish, so now they must get out there and do it? Or would he observe that, whatever they've been taught, they have not succeeded in learning the skill? Would he then despise them, or search for another way to reach them?

These people have explainable reasons for being the way they are, but that's beside the point. You don't have to raise your hackles at the notion that you've been asked to feel sorry for them.

Instead, take a clue that it is in your self-interest to change things. Otherwise, your sort of harsh solution leads toward the Final Solution. WWJD?

Wednesday, May 05, 2010 10:20:00 PM

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