AIMS For a better birth...

UNICEF and Formula Milk Advertising

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The National Childbirth Trust, Save the Children and UNICEF have developed a campaign to encourage our Government to take effective action against the formula milk companies who are exploiting loopholes in the law to advertise their products. AIMS wholeheartedly supports this initiative and you can help too.

What do we want?

It is illegal in the UK to adver tise milk for babies under 6 months old. This is to allow parents to make informed choices about how they feed their babies, based on impartial and accurate information from health professionals, free from commercial pressure. However, the law has two huge loopholes which manufacturers of formula milk are exploiting to continue their advertising.

That's why you see adverts for formula milk on TV and in magazines for parents, when it's supposed to be illegal. Right now, the Government is redrafting the law on formula marketing and UNICEF believes that this is a perfect opportunity to close those loopholes and make sure that the law does its job properly. The Government has regularly stated that it wants to adopt World Health Organisation recommendations prohibiting these adverts.

UNICEF is therefore calling on the government to make the law fit for purpose and to ensure that parents are able to make informed choices.

Loopholes

The two loopholes, result in 60% of mothers saying they have seen adver ts which are supposed to be illegal.

Firstly, advertising formula for babies under 6 months is banned, but advertising it for babies over 6 months is allowed. Companies ensure that their milk for younger and older babies are almost identical, so that an advert for one automatically promotes the other.

Secondly, to prevent information materials for parents from being used to promote specific products, the law bans companies from putting the name of their brands on any information they provide to mothers. However, they are allowed to use their company logo. By making the company logo and milk brand name identical, names and logos on information materials is both legal and illegal, allowing companies to promote their milks, but making it impossible for Trading Standards to enforce the law.

Why do we need a law at all?

UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and the UK government are all clear in recommending that breastfeeding is the healthiest way to feed a baby. However, manufacturers of formula milk make hundreds of millions of pounds from mothers who don't breastfeed.

Ten times more money is spent advertising baby milk than the government spends advertising breastfeeding. UNICEF believes that by taking commercial promotion out of the equation, parents can decide what's best for them and their babies based on impartial information.

Helplines

The law does not prevent companies from giving information, and UNICEF is not seeking to stop this. However, it's not clear that Helplines are there to provide information. From a marketing point of view, they look like a clever way of getting parents details so that companies can send adver tising. It's the advertising that UNICEF is trying to stop.

Offering a helpline also supports a company's wider marketing plan. To persuade mothers not to breastfeed, milk manufacturers tend to present themselves as infant feeding experts, and helplines may be part of the strategy.

Aren't the helplines staffed by independent midwives?

No - the people on the end of the helpline may well be health professionals, but they're employees of the formula industry, not independent practitioners. In the end, they're working for a company whose job is to sell milk. For independent advice from a health professional, all a mother has to do is pop in to her local maternity unit or baby clinic - that's where reliable and impartial information should come from.

Information

The law does not prevent companies from giving information. UNICEF is trying to stop the advertising. Advertising is not information. Advertising tries to persuade you to buy something. Information tries to inform you about something. The milk companies have had years of opportunity to provide information in their adverts, but this has never happened.

Thankfully, parents don't need to rely on the companies for information about feeding their babies. There is a great deal of good information on infant feeding freely available from the government, UNICEF, the NHS and the voluntary sector.

Contamination - case study on information

The World Health Organisation points out that formula powder is commonly contaminated during manufacture by a highly dangerous, potentially fatal bacteria.

If parents make bottles up safely, one at a time, using water at the right temperature and don't store them too long, the contamination won't harm babies. If they don't do this, it's dangerous. For a new mother, understanding this is pretty important and, if she bottle feeds, it might encourage her to follow the instructions properly.

Information from the formula industry tends to stick to simple phrases like 'follow the instructions carefully'. What they should really say, and what information from impartial sources tends to say, is something like 'make sure you follow these instructions carefully - otherwise your baby may become seriously ill'. The companies don't do this, preferring instead to show pictures of healthy babies and to claim that their milks are close to breastmilk.

You can take action and sign the petition – just go to

www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/53_2573.htm or www.advocacyonline.net/eactivist/user/userJ.jsp? *[neither website still available]*