Protecting Europe's children from unhealthy food marketing: turning the Commission's commitment to child protection into action

Brussels, 13 November 2026

To: *Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission*
Henna Virkkunen, Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy
Michael McGrath, Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer protection

Dear President,
Dear Commissioners,

President von der Leyen's 2026 State of the Union address reaffirmed the importance of protecting children from digital environments that threaten their wellbeing. We strongly welcome this commitment and urge you **to extend the same principle to another pervasive threat to children's health: the relentless marketing of unhealthy food.**

We, the undersigned organisations, call on the European Commission to turn its commitment to child protection into concrete action by establishing **coherent, enforceable EU rules to protect all children from unhealthy food marketing, across the media and platforms they use.**

For more than two decades, scientific evidence has consistently shown that food marketing shapes children's dietary preferences, purchase requests and consumption. Most food marketing directed at children promotes foods high in fat, sugar and salt, undermining efforts by families, schools and public authorities to foster healthy diets and prevent obesity and diet-related diseases.

The stakes are high. One in three children across the EU live with overweight or obesity,[1] with children from lower-income households disproportionately affected. Childhood obesity has multiple causes, yet the food environment in which children grow up matters. **The World**

[1] UNICEF, Gaps and inequities in child health across the European Union, October 2025. https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/gaps-and-inequities-child-health-across-european-union

Health Organisation (WHO) found "unequivocal" evidence that marketing of unhealthy food and drinks is related to childhood obesity.[2] The Commission's Safe Hearts Plan also recognises that children and young people are "particularly vulnerable" to the marketing of unhealthy food,[3] with socio-economically disadvantaged groups facing greater exposure to such marketing and being at greater risk of unhealthy diets. Leaving this marketing unregulated risks further deepening existing health inequalities.

Today's marketing ecosystem makes this challenge even more pressing. Influencers blur the line between advertising and entertainment, livestream gaming exposes children to commercial messages through gameplay and streamer endorsements, advergames embed commercial messages in play, and sponsorship of sports events integrates brand promotion into activities that children enjoy. Meanwhile, data-driven techniques enable commercial messages to be tailored to children's interests and vulnerabilities. Children need protection not only from harmful online content and design, but also from commercial practices that exploit their attention and shape their behaviour.

There is also a compelling economic case for prevention. Europe's sustainable prosperity depends on enabling children to learn, develop to their full potential and participate fully in society. The OECD identifies restrictions on marketing unhealthy products to children, including unhealthy food, among the most cost-effective policy tools available to governments.[4]

Yet marketing crosses borders while protection remains fragmented across Member States. This leaves children unevenly protected and makes it harder to address cross-border commercial practices. **Common, enforceable EU rules would close these gaps, provide greater clarity for businesses operating across the Single Market and ensure that children's protection does not depend on where they live or which media they use.**

Europe has the competence - and the opportunity - to act.

The EU cannot regulate every form of food marketing, and national authorities have an important role to play. However, the EU has significant powers to address cross-border marketing and establish common rules that ensure a high level of public health and consumer protection. The Commission should use these powers to establish effective EU safeguards while preserving Member States' ability to adopt stronger measures where EU law permits. Three immediate opportunities should be seized:

The evaluation and revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) must deliver stronger, binding protection for children across television broadcasting, on-demand audiovisual media services and video-sharing platforms. This should include a 6 a.m.–11 p.m. watershed for unhealthy food advertising on television, and a comprehensive ban on the marketing of unhealthy food products across on-demand audiovisual media services and video-sharing platforms covered by the Directive. These rules should protect all children under 18, including when they watch content not specifically intended for them, and use a

[2] World Health Organisation (2016). Report of the Commission on ending childhood obesity.
[3] European Commission (2025).Communication on an EU cardiovascular health plan: the Safe Hearts Plan (COM(2025) 1024).
[4] *The Health and Economic Benefits of Tackling Non-Communicable Diseases* (OECD, 2026), at page 30.

robust, government-led nutrient profiling model, such as the WHO Europe model,[5] to determine which products may not be marketed to children.

The Digital Fairness Act (DFA) is a welcome step towards protecting children from persuasive commercial practices that exploit their vulnerabilities. However, transparency and disclosure requirements, even when complemented by restrictions on certain practices, are insufficient to protect children from the pervasive marketing of unhealthy food in digital environments. The DFA must be strengthened to establish a comprehensive prohibition on the online marketing of unhealthy food to children, extending beyond audiovisual advertising to include food companies' own websites, social media accounts and other digital marketing channels. It must explicitly prohibit the marketing of unhealthy food to children as an unfair commercial practice, including influencer marketing, and strengthen the responsibility of brands and other commercial actors.

The EU KIDS Act and the wider framework for child online safety must ensure that "safety-by-design" addresses the commercial environment children encounter online, including their exposure to unhealthy food marketing. As the internet does not stop at national borders, fragmented national approaches risk leaving children with different levels of protection depending on where they live. The EU KIDS Act offers an opportunity to establish a common, high level of protection across Europe, with effective EU-level enforcement for the largest platforms. The forthcoming legislative negotiations must strengthen these safeguards and ensure that the Act complements specific, enforceable rules on unhealthy food marketing to children.

Together, these initiatives should form a coherent approach: reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing across audiovisual and digital environments, restricting exploitative persuasive practices, and ensuring effective implementation and enforcement.

Protecting children requires political choices. Commercial practices that undermine children's wellbeing should not be accepted as the inevitable price of a modern economy. The same principle must apply when the harm concerns their physical health and the food environment in which they grow up.

We call on the Commission to turn its commitment into concrete legislative action. The AVMSD review, the Digital Fairness Act and the EU KIDS Act provide immediate opportunities to make progress. **They should be used to establish a coherent approach that protects every child in Europe from unhealthy food marketing.**

We stand ready to work with the European Commission to achieve this objective and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you in a meeting.

Yours Sincerely,

The undersigned organisations:

[5] https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/WHO-EURO-2023-6894-46660-68492


Agroecology
Europe


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