



Save the Children

DON'T PUSH IT



**Why the formula milk industry
must clean up its act**

SUMMARY

The lives and the health of millions of vulnerable children are at risk from a threat that receives too little attention – the rapid growth of the market for baby milk formula. The unique life-saving and life-enhancing benefits of breastfeeding are proven. However, the global market in breast-milk substitutes is seeing a five-fold increase in two decades that far outstrips the world's population growth. By 2019 that market will be worth more than \$70 billion – more than a tenth of the GDP of a rich country like Switzerland.

Much of this growth stems from powerful marketing campaigns that have led mothers to limit or abandon breastfeeding. Six companies today are among the leaders of the aggressive global promotion of milk formula and other foods for very young children – Nestlé, Danone, RB (who recently acquired Mead Johnson), Abbott, FrieslandCampina and Kraft Heinz.*

CHILDREN'S LIVES AND FUTURES ON THE LINE

This report does not deny that milk formula has a positive role to play in the right conditions. There is a recognised medical need for some infants to be formula-fed and, in addition, some parents choose to provide their children formula for a number of different reasons. Nor does this report pin all the blame for the rapid increase in milk formula consumption on manufacturers: rising incomes, urbanisation, increased female participation in the labour force, and inadequate policies and legislation to encourage and empower mothers to breastfeed at home or while returning to work play a significant role.

However, an overwhelming and growing body of scientific evidence makes clear that no industrially processed substitute comes close to providing the benefits of breast milk. WHO recommends breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. Thereafter, children should be given nutritious complementary foods and continue breastfeeding up to the age of two or beyond.

It is estimated that 823,000 child deaths would be prevented each year in low- and middle-income countries if breastfeeding were adopted at close-to-universal levels. In particular, insufficient breastfeeding increases the risk of pneumonia and diarrhoea – now the first and second biggest

infectious killers of children worldwide. If all children were breastfed, it is estimated that about a third of respiratory infections and half of all cases of diarrhoea would be avoided. Yet despite this, in low and middle-income countries, only 40% of children younger than six months are exclusively breastfed.

The decline in breastfeeding has been linked to Western epidemics of inflammatory disease and obesity, and has the potential to affect the health of future generations. And yet manufacturers of milk formulas – a direct competitor of breast milk – have successfully established a supposed 'equivalence' in the minds of many people between breast milk and milk formula, creating the perception that the latter is simply an artificial replica of the former.

While the problem is global, there is evidence that developing countries suffer most. In countries with limited access to sufficient, safe and affordable water and adequate sanitation, and with a high prevalence of acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea and measles, the consequences of a mother switching to infant formula can be a matter of life and death. The risk of dying from pneumonia among infants under five months is about nine times greater among those not breastfed compared with those partially breastfed.

In 2016 the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights declared that breastfeeding is a human rights issue for both mothers and children, and should be protected and promoted for the benefit of both.

* The data presented in *Don't Push It* is the best evidence of Code violations to date. It is primarily drawn from the Access to Nutrition Index, which is aligned with the UNICEF and World Health Organization monitoring guidelines, alongside other surveys, including NetCode, a WHO method for assessing Code violations in countries.

THE BOOMING BREAST-MILK SUBSTITUTE INDUSTRY

The market for infant formula and follow-on milk formulas is growing at eight times the pace of the global population. This is a first in the history of human evolution – never before has the way babies and small children are nourished changed so dramatically and on such a scale.

A global milk formula market that was worth less than \$15 billion in 1998 reached sales of almost \$44.8 billion in 2014 and is set to reach \$70.6 billion by 2019. *The Lancet* describes the shift from breastfeeding to formula use as having “catastrophic consequences on breastfeeding rates and the health of subsequent generations.”

This growth of the industry is no accident. It is not simply due to overzealous sales and marketing departments. Instead, as this report shows, it is driven from the most senior levels of each organisation and by extensive use of advertising and promotion. As Mead Johnson’s former Chief Executive Kasper Jakobsen has said: “We have to wait for babies to be born that we can capture. That can then go through our acquisition, retention, and extension model.”

FLOUTING THE CODE

The rapid growth of the breast-milk substitute industry has occurred in spite of the adoption almost 40 years ago of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes by the World Health Assembly (WHA), the highest public health policy-making body in the world. The Code is designed to prevent companies from promoting infant formula, other milk formulas and food that fully or partially replace breast milk. It sets out ‘a recommended basis for action’ that companies can voluntarily adopt to demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding the health of our youngest children. The Code and its subsequent resolutions (‘the Code’) has been adopted, though seldom in full, in 135 countries.

While compliance with the Code varies by company, new analysis by Save the Children shows that RB, through its recent acquisition of Mead Johnson, is the least compliant company, while Nestlé and Danone have in place the most extensive policies. However, all the six companies listed in this report* – which together own more than 50% of the industry’s market share – fail to adhere to the Code on the ground. There is an urgent need

Leslie lives in Manila. Her youngest child, Xian, is three months old.

“I feed Xian Jeff with Bonna every morning,” she says.

“The formula I am using right now is rather expensive especially if you have a tight budget. It costs a hundred pesos a day. It’s hard to budget because we don’t have enough income.

“Sometimes we don’t get to buy breakfast in the morning so that the rest of my children can have packed snacks for school. That’s why it is really hard.

“I used Bonna because I saw it on a TV commercial. That’s why I tried it. And my baby liked it too.”



PHOTO: CHLOE WHITESAVE THE CHILDREN

* The selection of companies for review and the evidence of Code violations presented in *Don’t Push It* are largely based on the work of the Access to Nutrition Foundation (see *Don’t Push It*, page 28).

for the industry to put an end to the promotion of breast-milk substitutes, and to comply with the Code.

Furthermore, spending on infant and young child formula promotion dwarfs public health budgets that aim to encourage and support breastfeeding. New analysis by Save the Children indicates that global marketing expenditure by the leading international producers may have been as high as \$7.2 billion in 2015. If spending on sales staff and administration are included, that figure is closer to \$17 billion.

By contrast, it would cost \$570 million a year to meet a commitment by the World Health Organization Member States to increase the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life to at least 50% by 2025.

OUR CALL FOR ACTION TO MANUFACTURERS, INVESTORS AND GOVERNMENTS

Save the Children, Action contre la Faim, BRAC, FHI 360, Helen Keller International and SUN-Pakistan call on manufacturers and distributors of breast-milk substitutes, investors and governments to create a race to the top to help millions of children get the healthiest start in life.

The chief executives of all six global manufacturers and distributors of breast-milk substitutes should publicly commit to upholding the Code and its subsequent resolutions, and agree to meet targets set to achieve full compliance. These companies should lead the way, by respecting the rights of mothers and babies, making the health of young children their first priority, and complying with the Code.

We recognise that Code compliance may hurt companies' bottom line. But it is not acceptable that the inappropriate marketing practices repeatedly condemned by all Member States of the WHA should continue to encourage formula use, displacing breastfeeding and, in turn, contribute to higher infant mortality and poorer health for millions of children.

Investors should recognise that aggressive marketing harms families, infants and young children globally and to use their influence to encourage companies to comply with the Code. The leading investors in this sector have more than \$110 billion invested in these companies. Business models that undermine the health and wealth of future generations pose a long-term financial threat to investors. In the shorter-term, business practices that generate the risk of legal disputes and reputational damage should also be a concern for responsible investors. The aggression with which milk formula is being marketed, and the tactics employed by companies to increase the size of the market and their share within it, mean these risks are real for all of these milk formula businesses and should be taken seriously by those who invest in them.

Governments should incorporate the Code and subsequent resolutions fully into their laws and regulations and should invest in independent monitoring, free from commercial interest, and effective enforcement mechanisms. Evidence from India suggests that violations are far fewer when the Code is enshrined in law and enforcement is effective. Governments have a duty to promote, protect and support breastfeeding as part of their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to help ensure children's right to health.

Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, and the chance to learn and be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.

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