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McDonald's Makes Ronald a Health Ambassador
Criticized Company Will Use Character to Push Fitness in Schools

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McDonald's Corp., known for its Big Macs and fries, is sending its flame-headed mascot, Ronald McDonald, into elementary schools to push fitness -- part of a corporate campaign to address the childhood obesity issue.

Ronald, the company's newly dubbed "chief happiness officer," has become the company's "ambassador for an active, balanced lifestyle," McDonald's Chief Creative Officer Marlena Peleo-Lazar told a government panel yesterday. Her announcement came the same week an appeals court reinstated a lawsuit against McDonald's in which two New York teenagers claim they got fat because the company hid the health risks of its food.

Other major food companies also are promoting fitness in schools. Last fall, PepsiCo Inc. sent fitness educational materials to elementary schools, reaching 3 million students. In March, the beverage and snack-food company will send another round, this time to all 15,000 middle schools in the country.

These educational programs were discussed at a day-long workshop sponsored by the Institute of Medicine, which Congress directed to study the impact of food marketing on childhood obesity and healthful eating.

The study comes as a growing number of health care professionals and consumer activists are calling for more government oversight of food advertising because the number of obese children has more than doubled in the past 30 years.

Several major food companies are responding to the concerns by reformulating many of their food products and developing or adding new ones to offer more healthful alternatives, such as reduced-sugar cereal. McDonald's, for example, has

added milk and apples to its kids' menu. Meanwhile, Kraft announced earlier this month that it will curb advertising of many of its snack foods to children under 12.

The food industry is seeking legislation to block lawsuits, such as the one just reinstated against McDonald's. The Virginia House of Delegates did just that yesterday, strengthening existing law by approving a bill saying state residents can't blame their weight gain on food companies.

In the past, the Ronald McDonald character has visited schools to teach about such issues as bike safety and literacy. Now the clown will be touting physical activity. No burgers or fries will be promoted. "Ronald does not promote food, but fun and activity -- the McDonald's experience," said company spokesman Walt Riker.

The campaign was criticized by Harvard psychologist Susan Linn, author of "Consuming Kids."

"It's just another marketing ploy for McDonald's," she said. "It has no place in the school. The amount of exercise it will take to exercise off everything these kids consume will take all day."

The program has been reviewed and approved by the American Academy of Pediatrics. "We're not endorsing McDonald's or Ronald McDonald, but wanted to make sure the message was safe and appropriate," said Reginald L. Washington, co-chairman of the academy's task force on obesity. The program, he said, "takes advantage of the fact that Ronald McDonald has such recognition with kids that if he tells them to get moving, maybe they will do it."

Staff writer Chris L. Jenkins contributed to this report.