

## TALKING POINTS: Changing Laws to Address Health Threats of Unrealistic Beauty Ideals

When speaking to decision-makers, advocates and other audiences, it is important to highlight how different it is to grow up these days with the internet. The pressure to meet beauty and body standards is greatly amplified by social media and influencers across many digital platforms.

It is also important to acknowledge that we do not expect to solve the entire problem with one standalone policy. The policies discussed below are first steps, part of a bigger policy package that can address both the cause and outcomes of this urgent problem.

These talking points are based on the results of rigorous message testing conducted for the two legislative issues covered below (reducing digitally altered advertisements and restrictions on the sale of weight-loss and muscle-building supplements). It is invaluable to conduct testing to discover which messages resonate most for your audiences so you can plan your advocacy messaging and recruit messengers accordingly. We will broaden message testing to additional legislative issues in the future.

### THE CENTRAL ISSUE

Kids today are growing up in a digital world that constantly bombards them with unrealistic and biased body and beauty ideals. This online influence can lead to very real offline threats to kids' health. While girls are at particular risk, no kid is immune. That is why our kids need a new front line of defense from harmful body and beauty ideals, one that stays ahead of the health threats by tackling both cause and effect.

**While we can't legislate body confidence, we can change laws to make it harder for children to be targeted by the empty promises of underregulated weight-loss and muscle-building supplements and the digital distortion of body size, shape, and skin tone, and other related body confidence issues.**

### THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

***Kids are growing up in a digital world, bombarded with unrealistic and biased body and beauty ideals.***

- Cultural ideals of beauty have long been influenced by media – yet kids today are much more exposed, spending an average of 7.5 hours per day on screens for entertainment.<sup>1</sup> Time spent on YouTube and other digital platforms has more than doubled in the last 5 years alone.<sup>2</sup>
- Anyone with a social media account or photo editing app can slim waists, lighten skin tones, bulk up muscles, and erase blemishes. Many social media influencers alter their images to attract millions of youth followers and advertising sponsors. Traditional advertisers – who widely use digitally altered photos – use these inexpensive channels to reach kids as well.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Exploiting the powerful influence of the digital market on our kids, the weight-loss supplement and muscle-building supplement industries are targeting young people through online ads and sponsored posts from celebrities, YouTubers, and other social media influencers.
- Digitally altered images reinforce beauty ideals that are not only unrealistic but racially biased. Advertisers commonly lighten a Black or Brown person's skin, reinforcing to our kids the destructive and racist belief that lighter complexions are preferred over darker skin tones.<sup>5</sup>

## THE OUTCOME

### ***The body and beauty ideals pushed online can lead to very real offline threats to our kids' health.***

- Exposure to unrealistic images of beauty leads to body dissatisfaction, a risk factor for mental health issues like unhealthy weight control behaviors and eating disorders.<sup>6</sup> In one study, body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls increased with the amount of time spent on social media.<sup>7</sup>
- Over 50% of teen girls and nearly 40% of teen boys reported unhealthy weight control behaviors in the past year, like taking diet pills, skipping meals, and smoking more cigarettes to lose weight.<sup>8</sup>
- The American Academy of Pediatrics has strongly cautioned against teens using weight-loss supplements or muscle-building supplements.<sup>9,10</sup> The Food and Drug Administration does not screen supplements sold over the counter for safety or efficacy.<sup>11</sup>
- Yet 11% of teens report ever using dietary supplements for weight loss.<sup>12</sup> Nearly 35% of high school boys report using muscle-building protein powders or shakes.<sup>13</sup> About 17% of high school senior boys have used creatine, an underregulated supplement, in hopes of building muscle.<sup>14</sup>
- Weight-loss and muscle-building supplements have been found to be laced with pesticides, heavy metals, anabolic steroids, and pharmaceuticals that can cause strokes, cancer, and severe liver injury, which sometimes require transplants or cause death.<sup>15,16,17,18</sup> Not only are these products not proven effective, they can be dangerous.
- These products also serve as a gateway to eating disorders among girls and anabolic steroid abuse among boys. In fact, young men who take creatine and other similar substances are three times more likely to start using anabolic steroids in just a few years.<sup>19</sup> Adolescent and young adult women who use diet pills have six times the risk of being diagnosed with an eating disorder within the next three years compared to non-users.<sup>20</sup>

## WHO IS AT RISK?

***Girls are at particular risk of the health threats that come from unrealistic and biased body and beauty ideals, but no kid is immune. It is important to highlight that this is a serious problem that goes well beyond the stereotype that only young, straight white girls are affected.***

- Kids of all ages, genders, racial and ethnic groups, and sexual and gender identities are impacted by body dissatisfaction, unhealthy weight loss behaviors, and underregulated supplement use.
- This is not a “girl problem.” Exposure to unrealistic and idealized lean and muscular body shapes leads to male body dissatisfaction.<sup>21</sup> In the U.S., eating disorders will affect nearly 10 million males at some point in their lives.<sup>22</sup> Transgender young people also have higher risk for developing eating disorders than their cisgender peers.<sup>23,24</sup>
- Children as young as 3-5 years old hold negative ideas around higher weights, and nearly one-third of boys and half of girls tried losing weight in the last year.<sup>25,26</sup>
- Body dissatisfaction goes beyond size. Digitally altered images that lighten skin tone perpetuate colorism and negative self-image. Researchers have found that dissatisfaction with skin tone predicts decreased body appreciation in people of color.<sup>27</sup>
- Black and Brown children are impacted by eating disorders in similar and sometimes higher rates as white children. For example, Latina adolescent girls are more likely than white girls to exhibit bulimic behavior, such as bingeing and purging, and boys of color across ethnic groups experience more bulimic behavior than do white boys.<sup>28</sup>

- Research also suggests that girls and boys as young as middle school from Black and Brown communities are more likely to experience eating disordered behaviors, including vomiting and use of diet pills and laxatives to control weight, compared to their white peers.<sup>29</sup>
- Sexual minority youth have higher rates of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight control behaviors.<sup>30</sup> Research suggests that, as early as age 12, gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens have elevated rates of binge-eating and purging compared to heterosexual peers.<sup>31,32</sup>

## WHAT WE CAN DO

***Our kids need a new front line of defense from unrealistic and biased body and beauty ideals, one that stays ahead of the threats to their physical AND mental health by tackling both cause and effect.*** While we can't legislate body confidence, we can change laws to make it harder for children to be targeted by the empty promises of underregulated weight-loss and muscle-building supplements and the digital distortion of body size, shape, and skin tone.

### **WE CAN: Reduce Digitally Altered Advertisements**

- We can reduce the bombardment of our kids with digitally altered images that negatively influence body confidence and drive them to chase unrealistic ideals by taking weight-loss and muscle-building supplements or engaging in other dangerous weight control behaviors.
- We can start by incentivizing companies to serve as an ally in the effort to protect our kids' health. We can offer a tax incentive to cosmetic, apparel, and personal care companies that do business in our state if they pledge to not digitally alter models' skin tone, skin texture, body size, or body shape in their advertisements.
- Consumer research shows a positive response to unaltered ads, which would serve as an additional incentive to in-state companies.<sup>33</sup>
- A tax incentive would meet the American Medical Association's push for guidelines on these unhealthy advertising practices to protect children's mental health, aligning our state's public health approach with physician recommendations.<sup>34</sup>
- Many states have used tax credits as a way to successfully engage companies as part of the solution to other public health problems. A digitally altered advertisement tax credit could be similarly tailored to ensure that it serves the interests of our state and the companies that do business here.

### **WE CAN: Restrict the Sale of Weight-Loss and Muscle-Building Supplements**

- We can get these dangerous products out of the hands of our kids.
- A commonsense defense is restricting the sale of weight-loss and muscle-building supplements to adults ages 18 or older and moving these products from open shelves to behind the counter. Currently, despite the dangers, kids in our state can just walk into a store and purchase these products.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics has strongly cautioned against teens using these products, and the Food and Drug Administration has yet to approve any over-the-counter weight-loss products for kids. Restricting access puts our state's public health approach in line with physician recommendations.
- By restricting the sale of these products to adults age of 18 and older and moving them behind the counter, our state can make it clear that it is serious about mental health – and that the status quo is simply not good enough when it comes to our kids' health and safety.

- Bills that prevent the sale of these products to children are gaining traction and have been filed in California, Massachusetts, New York and Illinois legislatures.

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