

OUT OF BOUNDS

The NFL's
Intensive Campaign
to Target Children



Executive Summary

Participation in youth football is in decline—a serious threat to National Football League (NFL) profits. The league's own research shows 60% of its most avid fans became interested in football during elementary school; those who become interested later in life are more likely to only be casual fans. In response to this crisis, the league's massive marketing machine has ramped up its direct targeting of kids: online, on children's television stations, in schools, and in partnership with trusted nonprofits and government agencies serving kids and families. This report details how these new forms of marketing to children raise a host of concerns, including increased sedentary screen time, exposure to junk-food marketing, loss of valuable instructional time in school, and encouraging gambling behaviors.

Major Findings

Encouraging kids to play fantasy football is a major component of the NFL's marketing to children, despite the fact that playing fantasy sports is a form of gambling. The league offers cash and other prizes for its fantasy contests, giving kids a vested interest in the outcome of NFL games. The league even promotes fantasy football in elementary schools. Gambling at a young age is a risk factor for problem gambling later in life.

The NFL markets media properties aimed at children in order to promote interest in its teams, its players, and its televised broadcasts. The league maintains an online marketing hub for children six to 13 called NFLRUSH with 3 million registered users. It also created NFL Rush Zone, an animated television series on Nicktoons, that is actually a program-length commercial for the NFL.

The NFL relies extensively on government agencies and trusted nonprofits to promote its brand to children. Fuel Up to Play 60, a joint NFL initiative with the National Dairy Council (NDC) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to promote healthy eating and physical activity, allows NFL marketing to reach 38 million students, nearly two-thirds of all of all U.S. school children. The initiative's wellness messages are completely

undermined by the NFL's promotion of sedentary screen time to kids and the league's partnerships with junk-food purveyors like McDonald's.

The NFL has produced and distributed branded teaching materials designed for elementary school classrooms. The materials claim to teach subjects like math and language arts but their real purpose is to promote the NFL's brand to children. All of the vocabulary words in one set of lesson plans are either basic football terms like "huddle" or "quarterback," NFL football team names, or characters on the NFL's Nicktoons show.

Children exposed to NFL marketing are also routinely exposed to the league's use of derogatory racial terms like "Redskin" as well as players involved in its off-the-field controversies.

The cartoon NFL Rush Zone actually features a character who is referred to as a "Redskin." In addition, the league's elementary school materials also make references to "Redskins." Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson, the players involved in the NFL's most publicized domestic violence incidents, were guest stars on NFL Rush Zone.

Recommendations

First and foremost, the NFL should stop all marketing to children. Until the NFL stops targeting kids completely, we offer the following recommendations to mitigate the harms caused by the league's most egregious marketing strategies.

- **The NFL should immediately stop promoting fantasy football, which is a form of gambling, to elementary school children.**
- **Educators should stop using all NFL-sponsored educational materials and promoting the league in schools.**
- **Organizations and government agencies that serve children and families should sever ties with the NFL.**
- **Nickelodeon should stop airing NFL Rush Zone and other NFL-affiliated media properties on its networks.**

OUT OF BOUNDS

The NFL's Intensive Campaign to Target Children

“We’ve been laser-focused for the last five years trying to connect kids to the NFL.”¹

- PETER O'REILLY, FORMER NFL VICE PRESIDENT OF FAN STRATEGY AND MARKETING

Introduction

The 2014-2015 National Football League (NFL) season has been marred by a series of off-the-field incidents involving its players. These incidents occurred amid serious concerns about the league, ranging from players with chronic brain damage to the use of racist team names and mascots. As a result, Americans are rethinking their relationship with the NFL and football. Parents are more reluctant to allow their children to play the game.² The league is facing a barrage of criticism about how it handles on-field injuries and responds to off-the-field violence.³ There is a growing movement to force the Washington franchise to end its use of the racial slur “Redskins.”⁴ And the NFL—which generates nearly \$10 billion in annual revenue⁵—is facing a challenge to its nonprofit status.⁶

To date, however, one especially troubling aspect of the NFL has escaped scrutiny: its pervasive marketing to children in schools, on television, and through branded entertainment. Reaching younger children has long been a priority for the NFL.⁷ Participation

in youth football—one of the primary ways that kids become interested in the sport—has dropped because of safety concerns.⁸ To maximize its current audience and ensure a host of future fans, the NFL is escalating its direct marketing to children online, on children’s television stations, in schools, and in partnership with trusted nonprofits and government agencies serving kids and families. These new forms of marketing to children raise serious concerns, including increased sedentary screen time, exposure to junk-food marketing, loss of valuable instructional time in school, and encouraging gambling behaviors.

The Concussion Crisis and a Decline in Youth Football

Football is a collision sport. Despite the fact that the game has been plagued by “concussion crises” dating back to the late 1800’s,⁹ the risk to players from repeated major and minor blows to the head is only now becoming fully understood by the public. The high profile deaths of once-prominent professional players like Mike Webster and Junior Seau led to the discovery of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in football players.¹⁰ CTE is a serious degenerative brain condition caused not only by major concussions but also by less serious, repeated blows to the head.

In 2012, 3 million children ages six to 14 played in organized youth football leagues.¹¹ Young players’ brains are especially fragile and children and teens may be reluctant to report concussion symptoms to coaches, trainers, and parents.¹² Unreported symptoms are especially dangerous for young

athletes because concussions have a cumulative effect that can result in severe brain injury or death from secondary impact syndrome (SIS) if an athlete suffers another head trauma too soon after an initial injury. The nation's leading expert on concussions, Robert Cantu, M.D., recommends no tackle football before the age of 14 (high school).¹³ Even then, Dr. Cantu recommends teams run no-tackle practices in order to significantly reduce the number of collisions sustained by high school players.

These revelations have led to increased concern about the safety of youth tackle football. According to a *Wall Street Journal/NBC* poll, 40% of Americans said that they would encourage their children to play a different sport than football due to concerns about concussions.¹⁴ Youth football participation is, in fact, on the decline. Between 2010 and 2012, the nation's largest youth football program, Pop Warner, saw a 9.5% drop in participation.¹⁵ In recent years, a number of states have seen up to double-digit declines in high school football participation.¹⁶

The NFL's own research found that 60% of its most avid fans became interested in football during elementary school; those who become interested later in life are more likely to only be casual fans.¹⁷ Because the NFL ensures its adult fan base by inculcating children with a love of football, any decline in youth football participation is a serious threat to league profits. For that reason, the NFL has turned to other methods for "getting kids hooked on the game."¹⁸

The NFL's 360° Child-Marketing Strategy

In 2012, Peter O'Reilly, then the league's VP of fan strategy and marketing, told *The Los Angeles Times*, "We've been laser-focused for the last five years trying to connect kids to the NFL."¹⁹ Since then, the league has stepped-up efforts to target children. The NFL now uses what marketers call a 360° approach—using television, gaming, online and mobile marketing, and in-person events—to completely immerse kids in its brand and promote its televised broadcasts, other media properties, and licensed products.

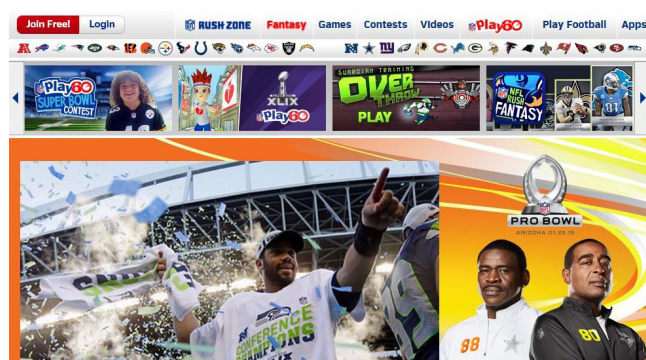
Former NFL Chief Marketing Officer Mark Waller explained the shift in the league's approach to children, "When I grew up as a kid, you played a lot and you watched a bit of television. The next generation grew up with a lot of playing and a lot of television. This generation is growing up with some playing, some television, and some online."²⁰ The NFL now targets young children through a multi-media approach "on television when they're in television mode, and when they're in digital and online mode they've got content of ours they can engage with it in that world too."²¹

The league also integrates itself into children's lives through partnerships with government agencies, local schools, non-governmental organizations, industry trade associations, and for-profit companies. Current partnerships are touted as promoting physical activity, healthy eating, and elementary education but all serve first and foremost to promote the NFL's brand to children.

The NFL's Youth Marketing Hub: NFLRUSH

In 2007, when "the big adult NFL brand wanted to connect with kids,"²² the league launched NFLRUSH, a website created and produced by youth marketing firm Brandissimo. NFLRUSH began as multiplayer gaming site but has evolved to include contests, video, apps, and an online community. As of November, 2013, NFLRUSH had more than 3 million registered users.²³ An email sent to parents after their children register describes the breadth of the league's current efforts to target kids:

NFLRUSH is a network of youth online websites and mobile apps, managed by the National Football



NFLRUSH homepage.

League, which provide an engaging, interactive online NFL experience for your child. The network is housed within NFLRUSH.com, the official kids website of the NFL, and is designed primarily for kids ages 6-13. As part of the NFLRUSH single sign-on account, your child will have access to both web and mobile (if available) versions of NFLRUSH, NFLRush Zone, NFLRUSH Pick Em, NFLRUSH Fantasy, NFLRUSH Game of the Week Contest, and the NFLRUSH ZONE Weekly Challenge.

NFLRUSH is designed to build children’s interest in the NFL season. It features numerous streaming videos of game highlights, football commentary tailored to a younger audience, and promotions for upcoming NFL telecasts. Fantasy football contests give kids a vested interest in the outcomes of NFL games. In addition, the Nicktoons television show NFL Rush Zone, targeted to children six to 11, is advertised across NFLRUSH as part of the league’s strategy to cross-promote its children’s media properties.

Encouraging Physical Activity: Play 60

Play 60 is the NFL’s initiative to encourage children to engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day. The NFL advertises Play 60 during televised NFL games and features Play 60-related content on NFLRUSH. Much of the current emphasis of Play 60 promotional materials is on encouraging kids to play football. Under the guise of encouraging exercise, Play 60 is primarily a promotional effort for youth football activities in light of growing parental concerns about potential head injuries.

Perhaps even more concerning is that NFL Play 60 promotes sedentary play that is at cross-purposes with



Fantasy football, videogames, and NFL broadcasts are promoted throughout the Play60 website.



The Play 60 app can be played successfully without ever running, jumping, or taking a single step.

a physical activity campaign. NFL Play 60 is housed at NFLRUSH. Far from being an online site dedicated to encouraging exercise, the website is dominated by sedentary screen activities such as online games, apps, and fantasy football, as well as links to game footage and player profiles, advertisements for its Nicktoons television show, and football telecasts. Play 60 has also partnered with XBOX and its gaming systems have been distributed as prizes to schools that participate in the NFL Play 60 Challenge.²⁴

In partnership with the American Heart Association, the NFL has created a Play 60 physical activity app for children and hosts an annual Play 60 Challenge for schools.²⁵ The app is designed to help kids get active: children run and jump to move their avatar in order to collect coins to win in-game prizes such as virtual NFL jerseys. The app, however, can be easily manipulated and players can collect coins by moving their device with their hands without running or jumping. The Play 60 Challenge is a four-week contest that encourages children to be physically active for 60 minutes each day. Play 60 Challenge materials are all heavily branded with

NFL players and teams, and teachers are encouraged to urge participating students to visit NFLRUSH.

Promoting Healthy Eating: Fuel Up to Play 60

The NFL partners with the National Dairy Council (NDC) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for an offshoot of Play 60 called “Fuel Up to Play 60.” The NDC and the NFL co-fund the GENYOUth Foundation, which runs the initiative. Fuel Up to Play 60 promotes the benefits of nutrient-rich foods and adequate physical activity. According to GENYOUth, a major benefit of the program is that it “offers the high-energy excitement of the National Football League as both motivation and inspiration.”²⁶

Fuel Up to Play 60 is the largest school health and wellness initiative in the United States. It reaches “nearly two-thirds of all U.S. school children [38 million students] and three-quarters of all school districts.”²⁷ This reach is due in large part to formal partnerships with the USDA and the NDC memorialized in a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

According to the MOU, the NFL, NDC, and GENYOUth have agreed not to use Fuel Up to Play 60 events “as a vehicle to sell or promote products or services.”²⁸ Yet the entire Fuel Up to Play 60 program serves as promotion for the NFL, as “students and schools can earn NFL-themed rewards and recognition like NFL player visits, game tickets, NFL footballs and shirts, teacher and student events at local NFL stadiums, and digital prizes.”²⁹

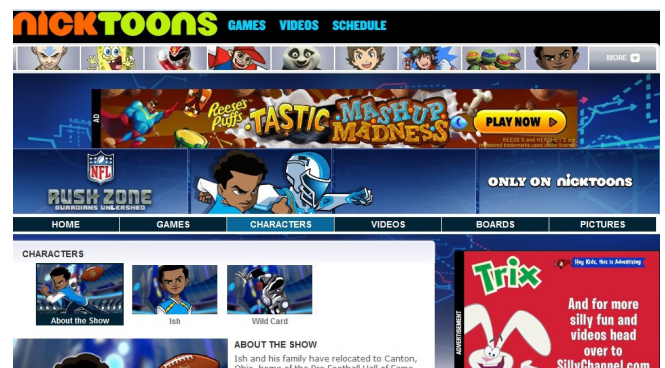
By promoting the NFL brand, Fuel Up to Play 60 undermines its own core messages about healthy eating. The league is a major promoter of junk food. The league’s official sponsors include Frito Lay, Mars candy, Papa John’s, McDonald’s, and Pepsi.³⁰ The most frequently advertised foods and beverages during NFL broadcasts are pizza, salty snacks, sodas, fast food, and beer.³¹ The NFL’s “do as I say, not as I do” approach to nutrition education makes it an unsuitable co-sponsor of any kind of school wellness initiative.

Children’s Entertainment: Nicktoons NFL Rush Zone

An integral component of the NFL’s plan to reach young fans is NFL Rush Zone, an animated program on Viacom’s Nicktoons cable television channel. The cartoon features NFL team mascots and NFL player guest stars. When the show was launched in 2012, Keith Dawkins, a senior VP at Nickelodeon, told *NPR*, “They wanted to see if there was a different kind of way that they could tap into a fan base at a young age—6, 7, 8 years old—and create these lifelong fans of the NFL. For us, [our interest is] the Nicktoons network—all animation, all the time, [a] 24-hour network really focusing on boys 6 to 11—so that’s when we realized there was a common sweet spot there.”³²

Overt NFL marketing is so pervasive in the NFL Rush Zone that a columnist in the marketing trade publication *Adweek* wrote, “When most of us were kids, we watched cartoons that gave advertisers access to our still-forming minds via commercial breaks, aka the down-time we used to brush our teeth (yeah right) or scarf down a third bowl of sugary cereal. But with ‘Rush Zone’ the cartoon is the commercial—and that fact should make both kids and parents a little wary.”³³

The NFL’s partnership with Nickelodeon also belies its stated commitment to promote children’s health through physical activity and nutrition-themed campaigns. Whether viewing NFL Rush Zone on the Nicktoons television channel or online, kids are bombarded with marketing for unhealthy foods. Nickelodeon is “the biggest source of



NFL Rush Zone on Nicktoons sponsored by Trix and Reese’s Puffs.

“...with ‘Rush Zone’ the cartoon is the commercial—and that fact should make both kids and parents a little wary.”

ADWEEK, SEPTEMBER 2012

food ads viewed by kids,” displaying 26% of all TV food and beverage ads seen by children and adolescents.³⁴ The overwhelming majority of these ads promote junk food to children. In 2013, 69% of Nickelodeon food advertisements were for unhealthy items.³⁵ Junk-food marketing is also pervasive on Nickelodeon websites.³⁶

During the 2013 football season, the league escalated its promotion of unhealthy food to children by partnering with Nickelodeon and McDonald’s on a NFL Rush Zone Happy Meal toy giveaway. Describing the co-branding partnership—the league’s first Happy Meal promotion—the NFL’s Peter O’Reilly told *Ad Age*, “For us, kids are a major priority, especially kids in that 6-13 window. That’s why we launched ‘Rush Zone’ in the first place. This now takes it to another level.” It also took the league’s promotion of fast food to children to a new level.³⁷

Elementary Education: NFL Advertising in Schools

In-school marketing is a major component of the NFL’s strategy for targeting children. In addition to the Fuel Up to Play 60 campaign described above, the league contracts with Young Minds Inspired (YMI) to produce NFL-sponsored education materials (SEMs). Lesson plans developed by corporations or trade associations exploit a captive audience of schoolchildren by providing marketing materials masquerading as education. One review of 77 corporate-sponsored classroom kits found nearly 80% promote “a viewpoint that favors consumption of the sponsor’s product or service or a position that favors the company or its economic agenda.”³⁸

YMI is a “full-service educational marketing agency”³⁹ that focuses on “producing results that make a positive impression and have a positive impact on... business.”⁴⁰ YMI has created “more than 2,000 in-school programs for the entertainment, toy, health and beauty, retail, fashion, fast food, and other industries” on behalf of 800 clients, including Chevron, McDonald’s, Walmart, Pfizer, Nike, and Nestle.⁴¹ YMI claims its materials reach “more than 2 million teachers at every public, private, and parochial school in the United States as well as schools in Canada and Latin America.”⁴²

The NFL is not shy about usurping class time to promote its brands. While earlier NFL/YMI materials focused on promoting collectible trading cards, more recent efforts reflect the league’s current marketing priorities: promoting fantasy football and the NFL’s kid media properties. While YMI claims these materials teach subjects like mathematics, language arts, and geography, a close examination shows that the primary knowledge gained by students using them is of football—and the NFL.

NFL Rush Fantasy—Learn, Play, Score!

NFL Rush Fantasy—Learn, Play, Score! is a fantasy-football-focused math and language arts curriculum launched in 2014 for third and fourth graders.⁴³ It includes student activity sheets, a



Classroom poster for 3rd and 4th graders.

Off-the-Field Player Violence

In recent years, off-the-field violence by players against women, children, and even animals has plagued the NFL's public image. Research shows that children who are sports fans often view their favorite athletes as role models.⁴⁴ Learning that their heroes have perpetrated horrific acts of violence can be particularly hard for younger children and has the potential to normalize or glamorize those acts.

In 2013, former Patriot Aaron Hernandez was indicted for three homicides. That same summer, a video surfaced of Riley Cooper, a wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles, using a racial slur while threatening an African American security guard. During the 2013 season, the Miami Dolphin's Richie Incognito was released by his team for severely bullying one of his teammates. The 2014 season was marred by the release of a video showing former Baltimore Raven's star Ray Rice's brutal assault of his then-fiancée. And Minnesota Vikings' Adrian Peterson, one of the league's biggest stars, was arrested for alleged child abuse.

NFL Rush Zone has been unable to avoid the league's domestic violence scandals. The 2014 season of NFL Rush Zone features two episodes with Adrian Peterson and Ray Rice as special guest stars. The NFL and Nicktoons no longer make these episodes available to children on their websites but both episodes were promoted by the players' teams via social media.

The pilot episode from 2010 features a jersey for now-deceased NFL player Junior Seau, whose tragic downward spiral included an arrest for domestic violence in 2010 and culminated in his suicide in 2012. After his death, examination of his brain revealed that he had been suffering from the chronic degenerative condition CTE.

poster, and a teacher's guide. During each week of the football season, students are instructed to use the NFLRUSH website to look up player statistics and then employ math and critical thinking skills to "choose their ultimate fantasy team each week at the official NFL fantasy football website for kids, NFLRUSH.com/Fantasy."⁴⁵ The NFL Rush Fantasy curriculum requires students to register with NFLRUSH in order to access basic instructional materials and to complete assignments. For example, one activity asks students to calculate players' scores but the scoring system is not provided in the materials. Students are instructed to "log on at NFLRUSH.com/Fantasy and click 'How To Play' to see the scoring chart."⁴⁶

No classroom assignment should require students to interact with—and register for—a website designed to promote any brand, including the NFL. In addition, the educational quality of this curriculum is questionable at best. The math skills identified in the materials include calculating team scores and the scores obtained through various football plays,

as well as charting, graphing, and comparing player statistics. But it requires a base knowledge of football terminology and a general understanding of the rules of football. This means that teachers must devote class time to covering this information. In addition, locating necessary information on the NFL's websites is difficult so teachers likely will have to spend time assisting students. Between acquiring the requisite background knowledge of football, including rules and terminology, and the time lost trying to navigate a less-than-user-friendly website, students will spend very little time actually engaging with math and language arts.

Most troubling, as discussed in more detail below, fantasy football is a form of gambling. Educators should not assist the NFL in its promotion of a potentially harmful and addictive activity to children.

NFL Rush Zone

NFL Rush Zone is a language arts and geography curriculum focused on the Nicktoons animated program of the same name. The 2012 version, NFL

Rush Zone—Season of the Guardians, is for fourth through sixth graders and the 2013 version, NFL Rush Zone—Guardians Unleashed, is for third through fifth graders.⁴⁷ Each curriculum contains a one-page teacher's guide, three student activity sheets, and a wall poster that teachers are instructed to display in their classrooms. The activity sheets include word puzzles for vocabulary. Geography lessons follow the television characters and NFL teams throughout the United States.

Each activity encourages students to become regular, weekly viewers of NFL Rush Zone on Nicktoons and children are required to watch an episode to complete their assignment. A review by the authors of this report of four 2014 Rush Zone episodes found an average of 16 advertisements per

broadcast. As noted above, Nickelodeon is a major junk-food advertiser and McDonald's, Chuck E. Cheese, and Cocoa Puffs were among the brands and products advertised during our review of NFL Rush Zone.

Like the NFL Rush Fantasy curriculum, the educational value of the NFL Rush Zone materials is questionable. For instance, all of the vocabulary words taught in the 2012 version are football-related or specifically linked to the television show. Forty-four percent of the vocabulary words in the 2012 NFL Rush Zone curriculum are basic football terms, such as "fumble," "interception," "huddle," "quarterback," and "kickoff," 22% are names of characters from the television show, and the remaining 33% are NFL football teams.

Racial Stereotypes and Slurs: The NFL is not a suitable partner for schools, non-profits, the government, or children's media providers

Anti-racism activists have long worked to eradicate racist team and mascot names from a range of sports, including football. Team names that refer to Native Americans using racist terms are of particular focus because they continue to be used in many high schools across the country. This season, activists ramped up their campaign to force the Washington Redskins franchise to change its team name.⁴⁸

Even very young children pick up racial attitudes from their environment, including from the media. For that reason, the NFL's promotion of "Redskin"—a derogatory term for Native Americans—makes the league an unsuitable content provider for kids. For example, the NFL Rush Zone television show features a character based on the Washington Redskins' mascot. The character appears to be Native American and is called a "Redskin." Using the term "Redskin" normalizes a racial slur that simply has no place in children's television programming.

Similarly, partnering with or promoting the NFL makes nonprofits and educators complicit in promoting racism to children. YMI's NFL Rush Zone educational materials include references to "Redskins," as do the American Heart Associations' classroom materials for Play 60. It is unimaginable today that in any other context schools would use the term "Redskin" in instructional materials, except in curriculum explicitly designed to examine racism and bias.



NFL Rush Zone "Redskins Rusher" Happy Meal Toy.

ACTIVITY 1 REPRODUCIBLE ACTIVITY

GAME SMARTS

NFL RUSH ZONE: Season of the Guardians is an exciting adventure series premiering on Nicktoons Friday, November 30th at 9PM ET. This season, Ish leads a team of Guardians as they combine their football skills and NFL knowledge to protect America's favorite sport from the wicked Wild Card and his robotic henchman, Drop Kick. But when they are not caught up in the action, Ish and his friends talk about the NFL all day long. Do you know enough to get in the game?

PART 1 Like the situations facing Ish and his friends in **NFL RUSH ZONE**, this will be a test. Solve this puzzle to reveal your vocabulary knowledge!

Clues

ACROSS

- Oops! He dropped the ball.
- A pass caught by a defensive player, giving his team the ball.
- Chicago's NFL team.
- San Diego's NFL team.
- New heroes of the NFL.
- Baby horses — and Indianapolis's NFL team.
- Villain of the **NFL RUSH ZONE** series.
- There are 100 of them on a football field.
- The first play in every NFL game.
- Gather together on the field to plan a play.

DOWN

- He calls the plays in the huddle.
- This gets thrown, carried, and kicked during an NFL game.
- Scoring play worth six points.
- America's bird — and Philadelphia's NFL team.
- Super-fast engines — and a New York NFL team.
- Evil robot that helps 15 across.
- NFL team characters that protect the Megaroses.
- Bright red birds — and an NFL team.

PART 2 Now jot down every football word you can think of on a piece of paper. Write a short definition next to each one. Then you'll be ready to win one for your team during an in-class "scrimmage" led by your teacher. Teams will take turns shouting out a football word (like scrimmage), and the other team will answer with a definition of the word. Be sure to keep score — even though it's only a scrimmage.

PART 3 In the show **NFL RUSH ZONE**, you meet a lot of different characters, from the Guardians to the Rusherz to villains like Drop Kick and Wild Card. Watch an episode and then invent your own character to add to the show. Write a short outline of what happens when he or she joins the action.

Marty

WATCH NFL RUSH ZONE: SEASON OF THE GUARDIANS
EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT AT 9PM ET
BEGINNING NOVEMBER 30TH ON NICKTOONS

GO TO NFLRUSH.COM/RZ AND ENTER CODE RZYM1 FOR A GIFT!

An ad for NFL Rush Zone on Nicktoons disguised as a student activity sheet. Every vocabulary word is either a football term like “quarterback,” an NFL team name, or a character on the Nicktoons show.

The structure and design of the educational materials and associated websites require students to spend a significant amount of time unrelated to geography or language arts. In addition to requiring students to watch the show as homework, the NFL Rush Zone curriculum expects teachers to devote valuable class time to providing background information about the TV show. Moreover, when students are stuck on a question, the activity sheets instruct them to “Go to NFLRUSH.com for hints!”⁴⁹ Since the needed information is not accessible in a single place on the website, students must spend a great deal of time on NFLRUSH just to complete a simple activity sheet. As an NFL marketing strategy, this may be time well-spent but for students it is time that could be spent directly engaged with learning language arts or geography.

NFL RUSH Fantasy

The NFL has created a fantasy sports league for children six to 13 years old called “NFL Rush Fantasy” that can be played on the NFLRUSH website or via a mobile app. The NFL offers weekly and season-long prizes to children who accumulate the highest fantasy score. Weekly prizes include an XBOX gaming system, a Madden NFL videogame, and \$500 cash and a grand prize includes \$10,000 cash and tickets to a regular season NFL game. (The NFL dubs its cash prizes “scholarships” but they are delivered in the form of a check.)⁵⁰

Fantasy sports are a form of legal gambling whereby participants assemble fantasy teams from real sports players and compete against the other participants using the real-world performance statistics of the individual fantasy team members. In order to remain exempt from sports betting and internet gambling laws, fantasy team rosters must not match the composition of an actual team.⁵¹ Fantasy sports are a \$2 billion-a-year enterprise and three-fourths of participants play fantasy football, making it far and away the most popular fantasy sport.⁵² Almost half of adult fantasy sports participants pay league fees in order to compete against other players for the chance to win cash prizes.⁵³

Fantasy football also is an important tool for maintaining enough television viewers to attract NFL sponsors. Fantasy football and other forms of gambling keep “people interested until the end of the game and encourag[e] viewership of out-of-market games and games between two unpopular or struggling teams.”⁵⁴ A 2010 study found that fantasy football participation has led to a 35% increase in viewership of the NFL.⁵⁵

According to addiction experts, “wagering on fantasy sports, whether by paying league fees or other means, is a form of gambling.”⁵⁶ A 2014 study of college students found that 11.5% of students participated in fantasy sports and 44% of participants played for real money.⁵⁷ The study found that fantasy sports participation was correlated with gambling-related problems and that males who played for money reported higher rates than males who played for no money.⁵⁸ In conclusion, the researchers highlighted the importance of raising public awareness “that wagering on fantasy sports via league fees is

“...fantasy sport participation should not be perceived a ‘safe’ or ‘harmless’ form of gambling.”

ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS, OCTOBER, 2014

a form of gambling” and “fantasy sport participation [should] not be perceived as a ‘safe’ or ‘harmless’ form of gambling.”⁵⁹ The promotion of fantasy football to elementary school children is particularly concerning because research demonstrates that the earlier children begin gambling, the higher the risk they face of becoming problem gamblers later in life.⁶⁰

The NFL publicly embraces fantasy sports as a totally harmless way to market to kids. When asked directly about how the league is using fantasy football to target young children, the NFL’s Mark Waller replied, “We want to make sure that at the younger age, there’s a format for fantasy and a way to play that will allow you to engage. But also use it educationally. ...We’re also trying to work with groups to get the concept of fantasy based into the curriculum of elementary schools. If you love football and you teach them math through football, the chances are you may teach them better math and more quickly.”⁶¹

Whether fantasy football is an effective way of teaching math is debatable. What is clear is that the habituation to online and mobile gambling behaviors—including incentivizing winning—greatly outweighs any possible educational uses fantasy football might have for children six to 13 years old.

Intended Consequences: The NFL's 360° Child-Marketing Strategy Promotes Inappropriate, Adult Content to Young Children

The NFL reaps \$5 billion in annual revenue from its broadcasting contracts.⁶² All of its child-marketing efforts are designed to promote and increase

viewership of televised football games, thereby increasing the audience for its sponsors.

A typical televised football game contains an astounding 60 minutes of commercials.⁶³ For companies like Pepsi and Mars candy that have pledged to not market sugary beverages and snacks directly to children, advertising on NFL games provides access to a large youth audience without violating that pledge. Similarly, marketers of adult products such as beer, credit cards, and cars can reach young NFL viewers without reprisals for targeting underage consumers.

Exposure to alcohol marketing should be of particular concern to government officials, parents, and educators who partner with the NFL. Anheuser-Busch is the league’s official beer sponsor and since 2011 has held a six-year, \$1.2 billion contract with the NFL.⁶⁴ During the January 2014 NFL Playoffs, 8% of all ads shown during the games were for Bud Light, Miller Lite, and Coors Light (accounting for approximately 75 ads).⁶⁵ Anheuser-Busch also was the top individual company sponsor for the 2014 Super Bowl.⁶⁶

Recommendations

The NFL should stop all marketing to children

Many of its business practices—from embracing fantasy football to saturating its broadcasts with alcohol and junk food ads—clearly define the NFL as an “adult brand.” Furthermore, the league’s well-publicized off-the-field controversies and the Washington Redskins’ use of a racist slur for their name make the NFL a particularly unsuitable provider of children’s entertainment or educational content.

Until the NFL stops targeting kids completely, we offer the following recommendations to mitigate the harms caused by the league’s most egregious marketing strategies.

The NFL should immediately stop promoting fantasy football, which is a form of gambling, to elementary school children

Gambling at a young age is a risk factor for problem gambling later in life. For that reason, it is unconscionable that the NFL actively markets fantasy football to children. Even worse, the league offers cash and other prizes for its fantasy football contests, providing kids with a vested interest in the outcomes of NFL games. The NFL should stop hosting gambling-related activities on its website for children. All schools and teachers should refuse to assist the NFL in its efforts to woo kids to fantasy football.

Educators should stop using all NFL-sponsored educational materials and promoting the league in schools

Parents should be the ones to decide when and whether their children are ready to watch the NFL and engage with its various commercial properties. For that reason alone, schools and teachers should refuse to use the NFL's sponsored educational materials which are actually marketing designed to promote the league's brand to a captive audience of students. In addition, the questionable educational value of the materials belies their ostensible academic purpose. And no school assignments should require children to watch commercial television programs like NFL Rush Zone or spend time on branded websites like NFLRUSH.

Finally, no school should use educational materials that promote the Washington franchise's use of the racist slur "Redskin."

Organizations and government agencies that serve children and families should sever ties with the NFL

Non-profits and government agencies should not aid the NFL in its efforts to brand kids. The NFL produces

adult content and adult controversies. The league exploits its star power to infiltrate government agencies and trusted non-profits to target children, exposing them to inappropriate content ranging from a racist team name to alcohol advertising to games that promote gambling.

In addition, the positive health messages of Fuel Up to Play 60 and Play 60 are negated by the NFL's promotion of sedentary screen time and junk food. The NFL's relentless promotion of video games, apps, and television viewing contradict any messages about physical activity. Even the NFL/AHA's Play 60 app designed to promote physical activity can be played successfully without ever running, jumping, or taking a single step.

Similarly, the NFL's plethora of junk-food ties—from its Pepsi and Mars candy sponsorships, to its Happy Meal promotion, to the food and beverage ads airing during NFL Rush Zone and televised football—make the league an unsuitable partner for any initiative to promote healthy eating.

Nickelodeon should stop airing NFL Rush Zone and other NFL-affiliated media properties on its networks

The NFL's off-the-field violence scandals and its use of the term "Redskin" make the league an unsuitable provider of media content for children.

Conclusion

Football is an American institution but there is no doubt that the NFL's aggressive campaign to target kids is out of bounds. It's time for the league to stop any and all marketing to children—and for schools, nonprofits, and government agencies to stop aiding and abetting the NFL's efforts to connect its adult brand to kids.

Authors

Cara Wilking, J.D. is a Legal Consultant with expertise in the role of state consumer protection laws to limit unfair, deceptive, and misleading marketing to children. She provides legal technical assistance to public health officials, public health researchers, and advocacy groups working to reduce harmful marketing via traditional and digital media. She is the author of various scholarly articles, reports, and issue briefs.

Josh Golin, M.A. is the Associate Director of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC), where he organizes CCFC's advocacy campaigns and develops its communications strategy. His writings about the commercialization of childhood have appeared in a wide range of publications.

Charlie Feick, Ed.M. is a Research Assistant at CCFC as well as an Assistant Teacher at an after school program in Cambridge, MA. Charlie earned their Ed.M. in Learning and Teaching from Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2013.

References

1. Flint, J. (2012, September 5). NFL and Nicktoons hope to score touchdown with cartoon. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/sep/05/entertainment/la-et-ct-nfl-nicktoons-20120905>
2. McGinn, D. (2014, February 28). Should you let your child play football? *Boston Globe Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2014/02/28/should-you-let-your-child-play-football/pNbZLTK3ubchHXptuNJoHP/story.html>
3. Kilgore, A. (2015, January 5). When competitive desperation trumps good sense, it's jarring. *The Washington Post*.
Lariviere, D. (2015, January 17). Is NFL Really Committed To Addressing Domestic Violence Among Its Players? *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidlariviere/2015/01/17/is-nfl-really-committed-to-addressing-domestic-violence-among-its-players/>
4. Cox, JW. (2014, November 2). In Minnesota, thousands of Native Americans protest Redskins' name. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/in-minnesota-native-americans-march-rally-to-protest-redskins-name/2014/11/02/fc38b8d0-6299-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html
5. Mcgugan, I. (2014, October 7). What's the N.F.L.'s Incentive to Change? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/magazine/whats-the-nfls-incentive-to-change.html?mabReward=RI%3A17&action=click&pgtype=Homepage®ion=CColumn&module=Recommendation&src=rechp&WT.nav=RecEngine&_r=0
6. Weissmann, J. (2014, September 2014). The NFL Is Not a Nonprofit: So why does it get to act like one? *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2014/09/the_nfl_should_lose_its_tax_exempt_status_the_league_is_not_a_nonprofit.html
7. Karp, H. (2010, September 23). The NFL Just Tackled Your Kids. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703860104575508293696582522>
8. O'Connor, P. (2014, January 31). Poll Finds 40% Would Sway Children Away From Football. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1000142405270230374360457935314111318468>
- Fainaru, S., & Fainaru-Wada, M. (2013, November 14). Youth Football Participation Drops. *ESPN*. Retrieved from http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/page/popwarner/pop-warner-youth-football-participation-drops-nfl-concussion-crisis-seen-causal-factor
9. Harrison, EA. (2014, May). The First Concussion Crisis: Head Injury and Evidence in Early American Football. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(5), 822-833. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24625171>
10. Fainaru, S., & Fainaru-Wada, M. (2013). *League of Denial*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.
11. Cantu, R., & Hyman, M. (2012). *Concussions and our kids: America's leading expert on how to protect young athletes and keep sports safe* (p.146). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
12. Nowinski, C. (2007). *Head Games: football's concussion crisis from the NFL to youth leagues*. East Bridgewater, MA: Drummond Publishing Group.
13. Cantu, R., & Hyman, M. (2012).
14. O'Connor, P. (2014, January 31).

15. Fainaru, S., & Fainaru-Wada, M. (2013, November 14).
16. Leonhardt, D. (2014, November 4). Football, the Newest Partisan Divide. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/upshot/football-the-newest-partisan-divide.html?_r=1&abt=0002&abg=0
17. Karp, H. (2010, September 23).
18. Ibid
19. Flint, J. (2012, September 5).
20. Perlberg, S. (2014, August 27). How the NFL is Marketing Itself to Children. *The Wall Street Journal* Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/cmo/2014/08/27/nfl-cmo-mark-waller-interview/>
21. Ibid
22. Successes. (n.d.). *Brandissimo website*. Retrieved from <http://brandissimo.com/#successes>
23. Season Three of Nickelodeon and NFL Co-Produced Animated Series, NFL Rush Zone: Guardians Unleashed, Premieres Tonight. (2013, November 20). *NFL Communications website*. Retrieved from <http://nflcommunications.com/2013/11/20/season-three-of-nickelodeon-and-nfl-co-produced-animated-series-nfl-rush-zone-guardians-unleashed-premieres-tonight-wednesday-nov-20-at-830-p-m-et/>
24. American Heart Association. (2013). *Play 60 Challenge* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <http://education.state.nj.us/broadcasts/2013/OCT/15/10387/NFL%20Play%2060%20Challenge.pdf>
25. NFL PLAY 60 Challenge. (2014, September 4). *American Heart Association website*. Retrieved from http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Educator/FortheClassroom/NFLPlay60Challenge/NFL-PLAY-60-Challenge-Page_UCM_304278_Article.jsp
26. GENYOUth foundation. (2014, August 11). *GENYOUTH's 2014 Progress Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.genyouthfoundation.org/genyouths-2014-progress-report/>
27. Ibid
28. U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The National Football League, National Dairy Council, & GENYOUth Foundation. (2013, December 9). *Memorandum of Understanding*.
29. GENYOUth foundation. (2014, August 11).
30. NFL Sponsorship Revenue Totals \$1.07 Billion in 2013 Season. (2014, January 27). *IEGSR*. Retrieved from [http://www.sponsorship.com/IEGSR/2014/01/27/NFL-Sponsorship-Revenue-Totals-\\$1-07-Billion-In-20.aspx](http://www.sponsorship.com/IEGSR/2014/01/27/NFL-Sponsorship-Revenue-Totals-$1-07-Billion-In-20.aspx)
31. Gordon, A. (2014, January 30). The Advertising Football League. *Sports on Earth*. Retrieved from <http://www.sportsonearth.com/article/67170458/national-football-league-corporate-sponsors-television-ads>
32. Blair, E. (2012, November 29). The NFL's New Target Demographic: Kids. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/166160739/the-nfls-new-target-demographic-kids>
33. Thompson, JF. (2012, September 5). NFL Targeting Kids via Cartoons. *PRNewser*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/prnewser/nfl-cartoon-pr-campaig/45439?red=as>
34. Dembek, C., Harris, J., & Schwartz, B. (2013, March). *Where Children and Adolescents View Food and Beverage Ads on TV: Exposure by Channel and Program*. Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. Retrieved from http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/reports/rudd_report_tv_ad_exposure_channel_program_2013.pdf
35. Center for Science in the Public Interest. (2013). *Nickelodeon: Marketing Obesity to Kids*. Retrieved from http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/nickelodeon_brief_2013.pdf
36. The Public Health Advocacy Institute. (2013, December). *Why Digital Marketing is Different: State Law Approaches to Address Digital Food Marketing to Youth*. Retrieved from <http://www.phaionline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/WhyDifferentPDF.pdf>
37. McCarthy, M., & Morrison, M. (2013, November 15). McDonald's Launches First NFL-Themed Happy Meals Today. *Advertising Age*. Retrieved from <http://adage.com/article/news/mcdonald-s-launches-nfl-themed-happy-meals-today/245283/>
38. Consumers Union. (1998). *Captive Kids: A report on commercial pressure on kids in school*. Retrieved from <https://consumersunion.org/news/captive-kids-a-report-on-commercial-pressures-on-kids-at-schools-part-one/>
39. What we do. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from <http://youngmindsinspired.com/what-we-do/>
40. Who we are. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from <http://youngmindsinspired.com/who-we-are/>
41. Ibid
42. About YMI. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from <http://ymiclassroom.com/about-ymi/>
43. Lesson Plans: NFL Rush Fantasy. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from <http://ymiclassroom.com/lesson-plans/nflrushfantasy/>

44. Brown, W. J., Basil, M. D., & Bocarnea, M. C. (2003). The influence of famous athletes on health beliefs and practices: Mark McGwire, child abuse prevention, and androstenedione. *Journal Of Health Communication*, 8(1), 41-57.
- Martin, C. A., & Bush, A. J. (2000). Do role models influence teenagers' purchase intentions and behavior?. *Journal Of Consumer Marketing*, 17(5), 441-454.
45. Learn, Play, Score. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from http://ymiclassroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/nflrf_teacherguide.pdf
46. Know the Score. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from http://ymiclassroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/nflrf_act1.pdf
47. Lesson Plans: NFL Rush Zone. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from <http://ymiclassroom.com/lesson-plans/nfl-rush-zone/>
48. Cox, JW. (2014, November 2).
49. Rush Zone: Season of the Guardians. (n.d.). *Young Minds Inspired website*. Retrieved from <http://ymiclassroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/nflrushzone.pdf>
50. NFL Rush Fantasy 2014 Rules. (n.d.). *NFL Rush website*. Retrieved from <http://fantasy.nflrush.com/rush/pages/rules>
51. Edelman, M. (2012, Winter). A Short Treatise on Fantasy Sports and The Law: How America Regulates its New National Pastime. *Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law*, 3(1).
52. Martin, R.J., & Nelson, S. (2014, October). Fantasy sports, real money: exploration of the relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems (p. 1377). *Addictive Behaviors*, 39(10), 1377-1382.
53. Ibid
54. Bernard, D. (2014, January 9). The NFL's Stance on Gambling: A calculated Contradiction. *UNLV Gaming Law Journal*, 4(2), Article 9. Retrieved from <http://scholars.law.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1061&context=glj>
55. Nesbit, T., & King, K. (2010). The Impact of Fantasy Sports on Television Viewership. *Journal of Media Economics*, 23(1), 24-41.
56. Martin, R.J., & Nelson, S. (2014, October). (p. 1378).
57. Martin, R.J., & Nelson, S. (2014, October). (p. 1380).
58. Ibid
59. Ibid
60. Jacobs, D. (2004). Youth gambling in North America: Long-term trends and future prospects (pp 1-24). In *Gambling Problems in Youth: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives*. New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
61. Perlberg, S. (2014, August 27).
62. Mcgugan, I. (2014, October 7).
63. Biderman, D. (2010, January 15). 11 Minutes of Action. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704281204575002852055561406>
64. Crupi, A. (2014, January 31). Anheuser-Busch Is the Super Bowl's Top Sponsor: Beer giant has spent \$149 million in the big game since 2009. *AdWeek*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/anheuser-busch-super-bowl-s-top-sponsor-155412>
65. Gordon, A. (2014, January 30).
66. Crupi, A. (2014, January 31).



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

commercialfreechildhood.org