

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.**