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VicHealth and UNICEF embark on strategic partnership to boost child wellbeing in Victoria and beyond

Health promotion foundation VicHealth is joining forces with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on an ambitious partnership to advocate for the protection of children's rights and better support kids in Victoria and beyond to enjoy healthy diets and grow up happy and strong.

With a quarter of Victorian children above a healthy weight, placing them at higher risk from chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease, the strategic partnership will foster world-class Victorian research, pilot community approaches to inform global practice, and leverage UNICEF's global expertise in maternal and child nutrition.

Announced in time for World Children's Day, key focus areas for the partnership will include early childhood nutrition, more honest food labelling and packaging, and stronger protection for kids from inappropriate marketing of unhealthy food and drink, making it easier for kids to enjoy healthy food in the places they live, learn, play and meet, including the digital space.

As organisations that prioritise listening to and learning from communities, VicHealth and UNICEF will centre the voices and experiences of children and young people in advocating for a world that promotes their nutrition, health, and wellbeing. In addition to benefitting Victorian children and communities, this collaboration will have far-reaching impact, across the Asia-pacific region and beyond.

VicHealth CEO Dr Sandro Demaio said VicHealth was proud to partner with UNICEF in this ambitious effort toward a healthier future for Victorian kids.

"The impact of coronavirus has shown us that protecting our health is the most important thing. We know kids are healthier, happier and more resilient to serious health issues when they can access and afford a diet rich in nutritious, healthy food," Dr Demaio said.

"Yet we know that unhealthy food and drink companies heavily market their products to families, profiting from products that make children sick.

"We believe it's every child's right to have access to good food and be free from the predatory marketing tactics of global food and drink companies. But families facing greater barriers to healthy food are also more likely to be targeting by unhealthy food and drink promotions.

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“This ambitious new partnership with UNICEF will fast-track our work towards ensuring every Victorian child, regardless of their income, postcode or background enjoys a healthy start to life.”

Dr. Victor Aguayo, Global Chief of Nutrition at UNICEF, said the partnership with VicHealth will support UNICEF’s global efforts to promote child nutrition by leveraging the knowledge and expertise of Victorian experts.

“Global shifts to energy-dense but nutrient-poor diets have led to sharp increases in childhood overweight, obesity and poor growth around the world. We need to drive down the cost of — and drive up families’ access to and demand for — nutritious, safe, and sustainable diets. UNICEF is looking forward to working with VicHealth to build the knowledge and capacity of countries across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond for improved child nutrition,” Dr Aguayo said.

Nicole Breeze, UNICEF Australia, Director of Australian Programs said the partnership will play a fundamental role in helping support young Australians to thrive.

“UNICEF Australia’s vision is that every child has a fair chance in life and UNICEF Australia is working to enable all Australian children to reach their full potential, addressing disadvantage in children’s early years and ensuring that youth and adolescents can thrive,” Ms Breeze said.

“Good nutrition is a critical foundation for future success. In Australia, children face threats at both ends of the nutrition spectrum. Too many children living in households experiencing poverty are missing meals and not accessing essential nutrition, and like many high-income countries, rising levels of childhood obesity pose a significant long-term health issue. This partnership is extremely important and will play a fundamental role in helping support young Australians to thrive.”

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