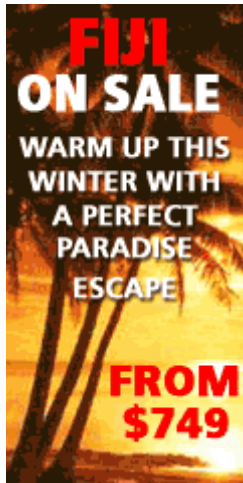




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Parents not McHappy over pokie toy

REPORTER: Rohan Wenn
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A McDonalds toy giveaway linked to a website that features gambling games has outraged parents, an anti-pokie campaigner and a psychologist.

The online game includes gambling simulations. For decades McDonalds has sold soft drinks, burgers and fries. Now the fast food chain stands accused of adding gambling to its menu.

McDonalds is running a cross-promotion with the makers of Neopets, the latest American soft-toy craze. A free Neopet is offered with every Happy Meal.

But the Neopets website advertised on McDonald's packaging and website has left parents such as Michelle Stiebel far from happy.

Among the activities the site offers are virtual pokies, roulette games, and card games where one of the cute characters teaches children the rules of poker and blackjack.

As Michelle's son Harley explains, you need to gamble to raise points to feed your virtual Neopets. He says if you don't gamble up enough points to feed your pet, it goes to the "orphanage". Players who don't win enough points gambling to buy food actually have to send their Neopets to a "virtual soup kitchen".

"A nine-year old boy doesn't have the ability to question," Michelle said. "He doesn't even know what a virtual soup kitchen is."

Child psychologist Michael Carr-Greg says this is a sure-fire way to turn our kids into gambling addicts.

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"I don't think there would be any parents in Australian who would be very happy to know that Ronald McDonald is getting into the casino business," Mr Carr-Gregg said.

He says children just don't have the critical facilities needed to understand the dangers of adult-style gambling.

"As far as I'm concerned, this is sanitising, normalising and glamourising gambling," Mr Carr-Gregg said.

No Pokies MP Nick Xenophon says this is yet another example of a junk food giant failing to act in the best interests of children.

"Let's listen to those people who've dealt with gambling addiction who say there's a very clear link between people exposed as kids to these sorts of games and developing gambling problems later on," Mr Xenophon said.

Marketing expert Con Stavros says the pro-gambling message could be even more powerful because it was coming from McDonalds, a supposedly family-friendly brand.

"I'm surprised at the naivety of McDonalds to let themselves fall into this particular kind of situation," Mr Stavros said.

Mum Michelle says she was surprised to see McDonalds associated with the games.

"I wonder if McDonalds is as informed as we are now, recognising that there is gambling on this site?" Michelle asked.

Apparently not, because late this afternoon, McDonalds Corporation told Today Tonight it was taking the issue seriously and shutting down the gambling components of the website.

"As a parent you can never be too careful," Michelle said. "You think you're doing the best you can and supervising everything, but some things still slip through and my son has been playing this for months."

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