

6. Selling Sugar and the SAT

Joe is a high school student whose family owns the only food shop near the high school. Lots of kids drop by on their way to or from school to buy his family's snacks. Joe works in the store before and after school and knows that many of these students, particularly boys, are consuming at least a one half-liter bottle a day of sweetened drinks (e.g. Coke, Pepsi--the full sugar ones, not the diet ones).

Joe, a student interested in health, has read about the connection between sweetened drinks and obesity. He is bothered that his family's business is contributing to what is an increasing problem in America and the world. Joe knows these students and sees that quite a few of them are already overweight or even obese. He has raised his concerns at the family dinner table on several occasions, expressing his discomfort with the fact that their business is contributing to the obesity epidemic.

Though they appreciate his argument that selling these drinks to kids with obesity is similar to selling cigarettes to teens, Joe's parents argue that they need the money they earn from the sales of these drinks to keep both the family and the shop economically viable. They also tell Joe that it is not up to them to tell teenagers, even those whom they know, what they should and should not drink, particularly as the sales are legal, unlike selling cigarettes to minors.

Joe knows his family can barely afford the SAT prep course that most of his friends are taking and he is afraid of jeopardizing their business, and his chance of being able to afford the prep course. So, he decides to let it go and not mention again to his parents that they should not be selling sugary drinks.

Study Questions for Selling Sugar and the SAT

1. Special responsibilities sometimes accompany certain roles—consider the special responsibilities of teachers or health professions. Do Joe's parents pick up special responsibilities in virtue of running the only food shop near the school?
2. Joe's parents make the argument that they're not positioned to dictate the eating habits of even those local teenagers they know. How can this argument be defended? Are there any circumstances in which it's defensible to dictate the eating habits of others?
3. Joe knows that his parents need the continued revenue of selling soda in order to afford Joe's SAT prep course. Joe's parents might thus be justified in continuing to sell soda in virtue of their obligations to Joe, as his parents. Do Joe's parents have obligations to anyone

(or anything) else that might make them decide against continuing to sell soda?

4. It might also be argued that Joe's parents should continue selling soda for the following reason: the teenagers who come to their food shop should have the full range of snack options available to them, because as consumers, having more choices is better than having fewer choices. Are there any circumstances in which we might justify making fewer choice options available to consumers? Are there circumstances, generally, in which having fewer choices is better than having more choices?