

**HiPP Organic:
Why do they want to be your partner?**

May 2021



This document aims to challenge the view that partnership with a company that produces baby milk and baby foods can be purely philanthropic. The same principles apply to other similar companies (see our briefings on Danone and Nestlé)¹.

The evidence we present is intended to help potential partners make policy decisions about working with HiPP Organic with **full knowledge of their activities, nationally and globally, which influence family feeding choices and the advice they may receive from health professionals.**

Why have we compiled this information?

It is unequivocally accepted at a global level, that breastfeeding is superior to the use of baby milk and other 'breastmilk substitutes'², nutritionally, immunologically, neurologically, endocrinologically, economically and ecologically. It is therefore against the law in many countries (including the UK) to promote infant formula. Consequently, companies use innovative strategies to ensure that their brands and logos remain in the public eye. To sell more products in the face of breastfeeding promotion, companies need to 'gain infant feeds from breastfeeds', and/or market products for older children (like 'growing-up' milks), and/or segment the market (e.g. producing infant milks which they claim address common infant feeding problems, like 'comfort' milks). The aim of marketing is to persuade consumers and those that support them that a product is superior, has special properties or is an aspirational choice. Undermining breastfeeding supports sales growth. This has been known and accepted by the global health community for at least 40 years, but companies continue to grow as their inappropriate marketing practices damage global breastfeeding rates, and thereby infant and young child health.

Multinational food companies have departments of external affairs, PR support, company representatives, trade organisations and considerable funds. They use these to persuade charities, health professional, advocacy and practical support groups and those working more widely in education, health and social care, that they are a suitable partner for their activities. **They try to convince prospective partners that their interests are purely philanthropic, and that their information can be trusted. They argue that they have no direct impact on how their partner organisations work or on their supporters or members; they simply want to support a good cause to increase its reach and impact.** These arguments are tempting to organisations seeking additional funds to expand their activities.

It is important that anyone making a decision about corporate partnerships is aware of the risks of entering in to such a partnership with HiPP Organic, as highlighted by the independent evidence we present here.

¹ <https://www.bflg-uk.org/our-work>

² Breastmilk substitutes include infant formula and any milks (or products that could be used to replace milks) that are specifically marketed for feeding infants and young children up to the age of 3 years, including follow-on milks, specialist milks and growing up milks. It also covers other foods and beverages promoted to be suitable for feeding a baby during the first 6 months of life when exclusive breastfeeding is recommended. This includes baby teas, juices and waters as well as foods. In the context of the WHO Code, the term BMS also covers bottles and teats.

Contents

1. Who are HiPP Organic?
2. What do HiPP Organic hope to achieve through partnering with you?
3. What is the evidence that HiPP Organic markets its breastmilk substitutes inappropriately?
4. What might HiPP Organic tell you when they are seeking your partnership?
5. The take home message

1. Who are HiPP Organic

In this briefing we use the term **HiPP Organic** to refer to the company HiPP Organic UK Ltd whose global company is called HiPP GmbH & Co.

HiPP Organic is a global manufacturer of baby milk and baby food products and is one of the top 10 breastmilk substitute producers by market share according to the March 2019 Mintel report 'Baby Food and Drink UK'. In the UK, HiPP Organic generated £15 million in sales from baby milks and a further £15 million in sales from baby foods in 2018, representing 4% and 8% of the UK markets in these categories by volume respectively. HiPP Organic spent over two million pounds on advertising in 2018 and was reported to be planning on doubling its spend to £4 million in 2019.

In the UK HiPP Organic produce infant formula, follow-on formula, 'growing-up' milk, and specialist milks (comfort milk and anti-reflux milk, both classified and regulated as 'foods for special medical purposes' for use under medical supervision, although sold over the counter). Follow-on formula, 'growing-up' milk and comfort milk are not recommended by the NHS, see: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/breastfeeding-and-bottle-feeding/bottle-feeding/types-of-formula/>. For information on HiPP Organic infant milks see: www.infantmilkinfo.org.

HiPP Organic also produce baby foods in jars and pouches and baby cereals marketed from 4 months + (contrary to NHS recommendations, see: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/babys-first-solid-foods/>) as well as snacks and baby ready meals. You can read about the composition and marketing of some of their baby food products in these reports written by First Steps Nutrition Trust: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5d93d133019c986514158dd3/1569968443400/Fruit_%26_veg_pouches_report_for_web_Oct_2019.pdf and https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5a93f885085229b264ff6086/1519646858256/Baby_Food_in_the_UK+_2017.pdf

2. What do HiPP Organic hope to achieve through partnering with you?

Partnership makes them appear more reputable, and gain new customers

There are multiple reasons why a for-profit company will choose to support a particular organisation, but the primary one is always, ultimately, to maximize profit, its legal duty. Companies know that, as human beings, our purchasing decisions are based on how a product or service makes us feel. Linking their brand name with a reputable organisation buys them a halo of goodness and enhances their reputation. This is often achieved much more cheaply through partnerships than the mass advertising campaigns needed to get the same emotional response. Collaborations with reputable organisations burnish the company's reputation in a way they cannot achieve through marketing alone. Partnering with an organisation that is well respected will allow companies to increase their sales and consumer loyalty and improve their corporate image.

Partnership makes them appear more trustworthy, and gain new customers

When a company chooses an organisation to fund they will ensure that the objective of that organisation resonates with the different audiences for their products. If you are marketing baby milk and baby foods you will choose organisations that are trusted by parents for the support and advice they provide. If an organisation is trusted by parents, then they are also likely to trust the products and services of any partners of that organisation.

Partnership may allow them to gather intelligence and gain market advantage, and gain new customers

Collaboration gives industry the ability to tap into your organisation's knowledge about communities, gain new insights into what appeals to the people you work with, be they from a particular locality, a specific demographic, a specific population group or a disadvantaged community. Companies can also learn how their collaborators work with their target audiences and engage communities, which will help them plan their marketing activities to promote sales.

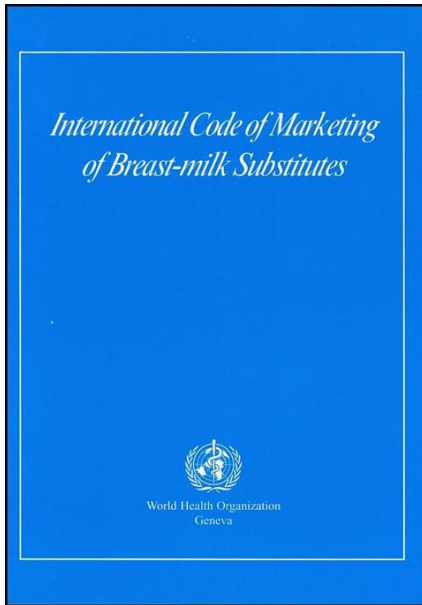
What does the Charities Commission say about partnerships?

Trustees have a legal responsibility to do what's in the best interest of the charity, to make sure they are sufficiently informed (i.e. making decisions on sufficient and appropriate evidence) and to manage conflicts of interest. They are responsible to uphold the reputation and independence of the charity. This means looking at the potential impact of any new partnerships and any controversies and being transparent.

3. What is the evidence that HiPP Organic markets its breastmilk substitutes inappropriately?

3.1 The WHO/UNICEF International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes

The 'WHO Code' is an internationally agreed voluntary code of practice designed to protect breastfeeding and to ensure that parents and carers using formula can make decisions on full and impartial information rather than misleading, inaccurate and biased marketing claims. It provides a framework of good practice for governments, health professionals and companies to abide by, providing the ultimate benchmark of what constitutes inappropriate marketing of breastmilk substitutes. It was adopted by WHO member states, including the UK, in 1981 and is updated approximately every two years, through the adoption of resolutions at the World Health Assembly, the world's highest health policy setting body. The Resolutions strengthen and clarify the Code; they have the same status as the Code and should be read with it. It is supported by all global health organisations and is integral to the UN Convention of the Rights of Child.



The WHO Code provides strict rules for how products fed to infants and young children should be marketed. **It forbids advertising to the public, free samples or gifts to mothers, industry contact with mothers**, pictures idealising formula and **cross-branding** as well as sponsorship by the baby feeding industry in order to avoid conflicts of interest. Abiding by the WHO Code and thereby restricting marketing of baby milks, baby foods and other breastmilk substitutes does not mean that such products cannot be sold, or that scientific and factual information about them cannot be made available. It simply **aims to make sure that parents are not misled by biased marketing**.

More information can be found here: <https://www.bflg-uk.org/the-code>

3.2 HiPP Organic's violations of the WHO Code

Below are some recent examples of HiPP Organic's Code-violating, inappropriate marketing practices in the UK and globally.

Advertising to the public, cross promotion, and contacting and gifting to mothers in the UK

Data collected in the UK in late 2020 by First Steps Nutrition Trust, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, highlights ongoing and pervasive online marketing by HiPP Organic of its breastmilk substitutes, see:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5fc525eb61e25426e1dce161/1606755838012/Online_marketing_report_final.pdf.

In particular, the monitoring exercise indicated **the payment of social media influencers to promote their products to the public** and **sponsorship of and provision of content for two popular parenting websites**, including **cross promotion** through the advertising of follow-on formula. Follow-on formula is marketed for 6-12 month olds and is a breastmilk substitute which can circumvent Code-informed regulations which prevent infant formula marketing in certain countries, including the UK. HiPP Organic **seek direct contact with pregnant women and parents via their baby club and 'advice hub'**, in the guise of providing support and advice on aspects of parenting.

Misleading health care professionals in the UK

In 2016 First Steps Nutrition Trust produced the first of two reports showing how companies including HiPP Organic fail to provide appropriate 'scientific and factual information', as required by both the Code and UK law, in adverts for their products in the UK, aimed at health care professionals, see:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5a9409c9ec212d94510cdb2b/1519651276998/Scientific and Factual booklet for web.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5a9409c9ec212d94510cdb2b/1519651276998/Scientific+and+Factual+booklet+for+web.pdf).

Companies advertise their products to healthcare professionals in magazines, through company representatives' information, healthcare professional websites, at study days and via helplines. Many of the claims made by HiPP Organic and others are, however, not accepted by scientific bodies, the evidence may be weak or non-existent and it may relate to a product other than that being advertised. The ads therefore provide misleading information intended to promote their products and boost their sales.

Many of the claims breastmilk substitute companies including HiPP Organic have made for infant formula, ingredients and formulations in the UK between 2017 and 2020 have also been reviewed by First Steps Nutrition Trust in this report:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5eba3eac6a3b687667d9891e/1589264046551/Claims made for infant formula and ingredients May2020 final .pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5eba3eac6a3b687667d9891e/1589264046551/Claims+made+for+infant+formula+and+ingredients+May2020+final+.pdf)



New legislations which came in to force in 2021 restrict the claims that companies can make for most of their infant formula products but not for follow-on formula, and 'growing-up' milks marketed for older children are not subject to any regulations. This means that companies continue to break the Code using unsubstantiated health and nutrition claims for many of their products.

'Breaking the rules, stretching the rules': Code violations globally and in the UK between 2014 and 2017

This IBFAN report provides **14 pages** of examples of how HiPP Organic violates the Code and undermined breastfeeding and appropriate infant and young child feeding globally between 2014 and 2017. This chapter on HiPP Organic is provided as an annex to this report.

The Code-violating techniques documented include:

- Promotion and advertising of products
- Discounts and gifts to parents and health workers
- Distorting public health recommendations, for example, by naming products in a way which confuses product categories or by using one aspect of clinical guidance in

association with their product, as has been done for products for infants with reflux and regurgitation

- Making unfounded health claims about products and ingredients which have often been shown to have no proven efficacy. This includes using logos and made up names for ingredient groups, and implicating specific products for the treatment of 'feeding issues' even when these have not been recommended by the health community e.g. 'comfort milks'
- Using technological advances and innovations to influence consumers through social media and phone apps. For example, using 'mummy bloggers', peer to peer promotion through the recruitment of parents, celebrity endorsements, and you tube films and endorsements by influencers. Parents can easily become unwitting 'brand ambassadors' for products
- Where local regulation prohibits infant formula promotion, marketing infant formula products through cross-promotion of products for older children
- Aggressive marketing in economies where breastfeeding rates have historically been good, focusing on the middle classes using aspirational ideas about products

4. What might HiPP Organic tell you when they're seeking your partnership?

"We work in the spirit of the WHO Code"

There are no breastmilk substitute companies which are compliant with the WHO Code. And whilst HiPP Organic may suggest they are ethical, "*responsible towards human beings*" and may purport to work in the spirit of the Code, there are several examples which show this is not the case, including but not limited to activities already mentioned above, including:

- Marketing of baby foods from 4 months +
- Baby club activities which target pregnant women and mothers
- Use of unsubstantiated claims made for their formulas
- Misleading marketing to health care professionals through journals and magazines
- Promotion of follow-on formula and growing up milks

and

"We're environmentally friendly"

Hipp Organic state "*As a leading manufacturer of baby food, HiPP Organic feels a special sense of responsibility for future generations, and for this reason the company has a long tradition of environmental awareness and sustainability. For over sixty years, our family has sought to protect nature, use its valuable resources responsibly and preserve its biodiversity...*"

Breastfeeding is the ultimate form of sustainable infant nutrition. In contrast, the breastmilk substitute industry causes "significant ecological harm: packaging, supply chains and bottle-

feeding apparatus all have a carbon footprint and introduce durable plastics into the environment” (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26869576/>).

Three examples which show that HiPP Organic is not environmentally friendly are:

- The manufacture and promotion of unnecessary ‘growing-up’ milks, see: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/608a66ccaaed640a6dd4bc4c/1619683021502/Drinks+marketed+as+toddler+and+growing+up+milks+in+the+diets+of+1-4+year+olds+April2021.pdf>
- The use of non-recyclable pouches for puréed fruit and vegetable-based baby foods which are predominantly destined for landfill. As part of the investigation undertaken by First Steps Nutrition Trust in to the issues associated these types of baby foods HiPP was asked: “Has any life cycle analysis to determine net carbon impact of your pouch packaging been carried out? Do you have a pouch recycling scheme for your products?” Hipp Organic indicated that they had not had a life cycle analysis carried out, and did not indicate that they had made a commitment to improving the environmental credentials of their packaging, see: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f75004f09ca48694070f3b/t/5d93d133019c986514158dd3/1569968443400/Fruit+%26+veg+pouches+report+for+web+Oct+2019.pdf>
- The 2015 Environment Agency enforcement undertaking for HiPP Organic’s failure to meet their requirements to register as a producer of packaging and to recover and recycle packaging waste, see: <https://www.circularonline.co.uk/news/baby-food-company-pays-415000-to-charities-for-non-compliance/>

and

“If you don’t partner with us you’re anti-formula”



There is no dispute that formula is needed by some carers and/or their infants and appropriate infant milks are required for infants who cannot be breastfed or who require specialist feeding. By advocating for WHO Code compliance, the international health community are campaigning for an end to the inappropriate marketing of products, with clearly agreed criteria for what this means, in order to protect all babies, however they are fed.

It is also important to remember that breastmilk substitute companies pass on the considerable costs of marketing their products to parents and health services through the unnecessarily high prices they seek for their products. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Infant Feeding and Inequalities undertook an inquiry into the cost of infant formula in the UK in 2018 which highlights this issue, see: <http://www.infantfeedingappg.uk/news/>. According to the

data collected in this enquiry, to feed a baby with HiPP Organic formula would cost a parent at least 50% more than using the cheapest product on the market, when all comparable infant milks must meet the same compositional requirements by law

Lastly... you may say:

“Breastmilk substitute companies don’t have any influence on our work. What’s the problem with using their logo when we don’t allow them to advertise individual products?”

Any association with an organisation will be made public by the company: they do not go into partnerships silently and will use a range of opportunities to link themselves with the work of their partners. Where they can they will use their logo because doing so raises brand awareness and enables cross promotion. Just by having the company associated with your organisation through a press release or website content announcing the partnership gives them a platform and credibility. This knowledge can sway the opinion of families.

5. The take home message

Going in to partnership with and taking funds from HiPP Organic, a company that markets baby milk and baby food, provides endorsement for their products (many of which are unnecessary and unhealthy); facilitates the inappropriate marketing of their products to your supporter base, against the WHO Code and with negative impacts on the diets of their babies and young children; and lastly, provides support for an industry that causes preventable environmental damage. Ultimately, this partnership endangers children’s rights and infant, young child and maternal health, as well as damaging your organisation’s reputation, role and standing as an institution trusted and valued by UK families.

