

## Healthy Restaurant Children's Meals Improve Children's Diets and Health

Some children as young as eight have detectable early warning signs of heart disease,<sup>1</sup> and the prevalence of type 2 diabetes in children and youth is increasing and disproportionately affects children of color.<sup>2</sup> While parents are primarily responsible for feeding their children healthfully, they cannot always prepare meals at home. Restaurants and communities should support parents' efforts to feed their children well.

Improving the nutritional quality of restaurant children's meals can help improve diet quality and cultivate lifelong healthy eating behaviors, which can help children grow up at a healthy weight.

### The Nutritional Quality of Restaurant Meals Matters to Children's Diets

Children frequently eat at restaurants.

- In 2012, USDA estimated that children 2 to 19 years old, on average, consume one-quarter of their calories from restaurants and other food-service establishments.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, the National Center for Health Statistics estimated that about 10 percent of children and adolescents obtain 25 to 40 percent of daily calories from fast food, and 12 percent obtain more than 40 percent of daily calories from fast food.<sup>4</sup>
- 89 percent of parents report making a purchase from a fast-food restaurant for their children in the previous week, according to the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity.<sup>5</sup>
- A 2012 analysis reported that 33 percent of children eat foods or beverages from fast-food restaurants and 12 percent from full-service restaurants on a typical day.<sup>6</sup>
- A 2015 study concluded that almost half (49.7%) of children ages 3 to 5 had eaten at one or more fast-food restaurants in the past week and one-third (34%) had eaten at McDonald's, in a study in New Hampshire. McDonald's consumption was similar regardless of race or household income.<sup>7</sup>

Restaurants are a top marketer to children.

- According to the Federal Trade Commission, fast-food restaurants spent \$583 million on marketing directed to children in 2009 (the latest year for which data are available).<sup>8</sup>
- Restaurants advertise their overall brand to children, often showing a healthier meal only fleetingly. McDonald's, for example, commits to highlight healthier meals in its advertising to children,<sup>9</sup> but children viewing its ads often recall only the promotional theme or movie character tie-in and not the meal visually displayed in the commercial.<sup>10</sup>
- In 2012, the Federal Trade Commission reported that quick service restaurant chains spend \$341 million per year on toys to promote their children's meals.<sup>11</sup>

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- In 2015, researchers reported that after controlling for parental fast-food consumption and demographics, children ages 3 to 5 are more likely to have eaten McDonald's in the past week if they usually know what toys were offered by fast-food restaurants.<sup>12</sup>
- Marketing particular foods to children by designating them as "kids' menu items" and by bundling them together as meals establishes food norms for children, which could affect their preferences in other settings.<sup>13</sup>

## The meals promoted as children's meals are consumed by the youngest kids.

- Among four common fast-food restaurants, parents surveyed are more likely to order a kids' meal for younger kids (aged 2-5) than for older kids (aged 6-11 years).<sup>14</sup>
- Data on the overall proportion of parents who order from children's menus vary. In one online sample of parents, 52 percent of the parents reported ordering a kids' meal for their children at their last visit.<sup>15</sup> (The proportion for children under age 6 was higher, at 64 percent.)

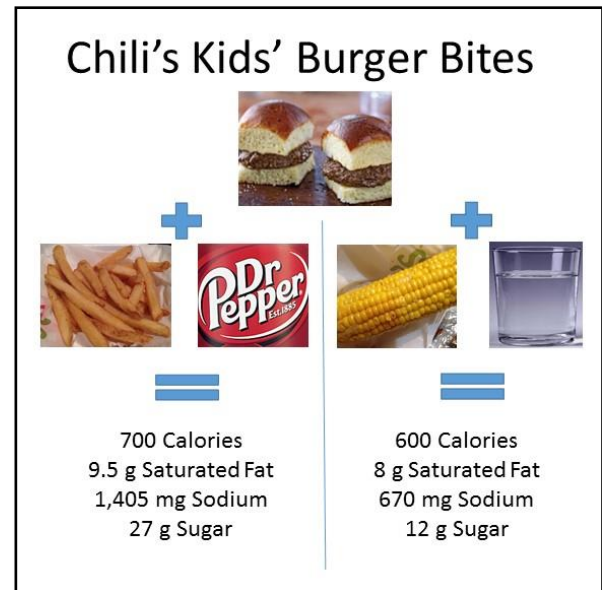
## Studies show a link between eating out and poor nutrition.

- Eating out by children has been associated with higher consumption of calories, sugary drinks, saturated fat, and total sugars and with lower diet quality compared to meals at home.<sup>16,17</sup> Researchers have estimated that eating fast food is associated with children eating 126 more calories a day, while eating at a full-service restaurant increases children's calorie intake by 160 calories a day on average.<sup>18</sup>
- In 2009, researchers reported that frequent consumption of restaurant meals is associated with risk factors for chronic health conditions, including heart disease, and high insulin levels.<sup>19</sup>
- A recent analysis found that 34 percent of parents purchased a soda or other sugary drink with their child's kids' meal at four common fast-food restaurants.<sup>20,21</sup>
  - Soda and other sugary drinks are the top source of added sugars in the American diet<sup>22</sup> and account for nearly half of the added sugars consumed by Americans.<sup>23</sup>
  - Excessive consumption of added sugars contributes to an increased risk of developing heart disease and obesity.<sup>24</sup>
  - An extra-small (ten ounce, child-size) cola contains approximately 33 grams of added sugars,<sup>25</sup> which exceeds the 25 grams of added sugars that the American Heart Association (AHA) has established as the daily upper limit for children and teenagers.<sup>26</sup> The AHA recommends that children consume no more than eight ounces of sugary drinks per week;<sup>27</sup> kid-sized beverages vary across restaurants, but are usually six to twelve ounces.<sup>28</sup>

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## Voluntary improvements by restaurants are slow.

- In 2016, the majority of kids' meal combinations at fast-food and full-service restaurants exceeded 770 mg of sodium; a majority of kids' meals at full-service restaurants also exceeded saturated fat standard limits.<sup>29</sup>
- A 2013 analysis concluded that the top fast-food chain children's menus do not offer ample amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains as assessed by the Healthy Eating Index.<sup>30</sup> In addition, a separate analysis concluded that only 40 percent of the top fast-food and 20 percent of full-service restaurants always include a fruit or vegetable as the default side dish.<sup>31</sup>
- Among the top-50 restaurant chains that included beverages as part of their children's meals in 2016, three-quarters include sugary drinks on their children's menus.<sup>32</sup>
- Restaurants have made some progress improving children's meals and the National Restaurant Association has formed its Kids LiveWell program to help restaurants increase healthful options for children.<sup>33</sup> However, progress has been modest and slow. Between 2008 and 2012, the percentage of restaurant children's meals that met nutrition standards increased from 1 to 3 percent.<sup>34</sup>



## Healthier Restaurant Children's Meals Support Healthier Eating by Children

Changing the offerings on children's menus, including changing defaults, can affect what children eat.

Evidence from a wide range of fields (including retirement plans, organ donation, health care, and food/nutrition) shows that people tend to stick with defaults and that setting beneficial defaults has high rates of acceptability (defaults are the option people automatically receive if they do not choose something else).<sup>35</sup>

- A 2015 study reported that more than half the children ages 8 to 12 surveyed who order children's meals said that they would be somewhat or very likely to order a children's meal that came with vegetables (56.2%) or fruits (78.9%).<sup>36</sup>
- When a large fast-food restaurant changed the default sides for its children's meals by reducing the size of the fries and adding apple slices automatically, the calories in the average children's meal purchased decreased by 19 percent.<sup>37</sup>

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- Children’s meals with healthier defaults at Walt Disney theme parks resulted in 21 percent fewer calories compared to meals with unhealthy defaults.<sup>38</sup> In this same study, parents stuck with healthy side dishes 48 percent of the time and healthier beverages 66 percent of the time.<sup>39</sup>
- A 2015 study reported that sales of strawberry and vegetable sides, and milk increased and sales of french fries and soda decreased after a regional chain restaurant implemented a healthier children’s menu.<sup>40</sup>
- According to an independent verification firm, “McDonald’s USA sold 21 million more low-fat and fat-free milk jugs and 100% apple juice boxes in the first 11 months in Happy Meals and ala carte after removing the listing of sodas on the Happy Meal section of menu boards compared to the same period a year earlier (July 2014 to May 2015).”<sup>41</sup>

## Changing children’s meals sends a positive message and models healthy eating for children.

- Food marketing influences children’s food preferences,<sup>42</sup> and restaurants spend more than any other segment marketing food to children.<sup>43</sup> This marketing, including through television, Internet, toys, and which foods are promoted as children’s meals, should be used to promote healthier options to children, rather than encouraging nutrition-poor options.
- Removing sugary drinks from children’s menus can send a signal that they are not appropriate everyday beverages for children. The vast majority of children consume more calories from added sugars than is recommended for good health,<sup>44</sup> and the number one source of added sugars in the American diet is sugary beverages.<sup>45</sup>
- Using toys to promote only healthy meals could change consumption patterns. One study estimated that children are three times more likely to select healthier meal options if toy premiums are used to promote only the healthier meals.<sup>46</sup>

## The public health community supports improving restaurant children’s meals.

- The 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee recommended that restaurants make healthy options the default choice by, for example, offering fat-free or low-fat milk instead of soda or other sugary drinks, and fruit and non-fried vegetables as side dishes in children’s meals.<sup>47</sup> The American Heart Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, and ChangeLab Solutions support the adoption of the RAND Performance Standards for Restaurants.<sup>48</sup> The RAND standards for restaurant children’s meals are consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and recommend restaurant children’s meals include at least two sources of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, or lower fat dairy, and limit fat (including trans and saturated fat), sugars, and sodium, and do not include a sugary drink. The RAND standards align closely with the National Restaurant Association’s Kids LiveWell nutrition standards for restaurant children’s meals.<sup>49</sup>

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