

# Obesity on the Menu

## Unhealthy Restaurant Children's Meals

**Eating out used to be a special treat, but these days families are increasingly eating meals from restaurants.** 25% of children's calories come from fast-food and other restaurants.<sup>1</sup> This trend is of public health concern because consumption of restaurant food is associated with increased caloric intake and poorer diets.<sup>2</sup> This is in part because many restaurants provide few healthy options for children.

**Most restaurants offer menu items designed for, and marketed to, children.** The vast majority of kids' meals include calorie-dense, nutritionally-poor foods and beverages.

- 86% of children's meals at the nation's largest chain restaurants are high in calories; many also are high in sodium (66%) and saturated fat (55%).<sup>3</sup>
- Despite the health risks associated with sugary drink consumption,<sup>4</sup> the majority of top restaurant chains feature soda or other sugary drinks with kids' meals.<sup>3</sup>
- French fries are the most common kids' meal side option, and over three-quarters of the top restaurant chains promote sugary drinks through kids' menus.<sup>5</sup>



**Fast-food companies target children and adolescents with \$714 million worth of marketing each year,** promoting products, brands, and toy premiums to kids as young as 2 years old.<sup>6</sup> Toy giveaways make up almost half (\$340 million) of that money, a marketing expenditure second only to TV advertising.



Children under the age of 8 are unable to comprehend that the intent of advertising is to persuade them.<sup>7,8</sup> The practice of enticing children to desire unhealthy meals using their favorite cartoon characters, toy giveaways, or other marketing techniques manipulates children's inherent trust and lack of developmental maturity.

**Food marketing undermines children's diets and health.** Food and beverage marketing influences children's food preferences, food choices, diets, and health.<sup>8</sup> Companies use marketing to shape children's food preferences and choices, including by shaping what kids think of as food. Studies show that repeated exposure to fast food and soda, through advertising, marketing, and consumption, cultivates a pattern for future consumption and a preference for those and similar foods.<sup>9</sup> Preschool-aged children recognize and prefer fast food and soda brands that are extensively marketed to them.<sup>9</sup>

## Support Parents, Protect Kids

Although parents are primarily responsible for feeding their children, restaurants should work with parents, not against them. Directly marketing unhealthy food choices to children through TV ads, web games, characters, apps, sponsorships, cross-promotions, school fundraisers, toys, and kids' meals makes it more difficult for parents to feed their children healthfully.

Restaurants have made some progress improving children's meals, but progress has been modest and slow. Between 2008 and 2012, the percentage of restaurant children's meals meeting nutrition standards increased from 1% to just 3%.<sup>3</sup> States and localities need to nudge restaurants to do better. Improving the nutritional quality of restaurant children's meals is a shared responsibility that should involve states, localities, restaurants, and parents.



Given the sky-high rates of childhood obesity, states and localities can support parents in helping children make healthy food choices by implementing nutrition standards for restaurant children's meals. A majority of parents would be more likely to purchase children's meals if they met nutrition guidelines.<sup>10</sup>

### Setting nutrition standards for restaurant children's meals supports healthy choices for children by:

- ✓ Encouraging restaurants to provide healthier options on children's menus
- ✓ Limiting the marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrition foods to children
- ✓ Encouraging companies to work with parents to feed their children healthfully

Municipalities generally have the authority to regulate commercial products and practices to protect the public's health, safety, and general welfare. Addressing restaurant children's meals is a basic exercise of that authority.

**Parents have the right to guide their children's food choices without so much interference from big food corporations.**

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<sup>1</sup>Lin B and Morrison RM (2012). Food and Nutrient Intake Data: Taking a Look at the Nutritional Quality of Foods Eaten at Home and Away From Home. *Amber Waves*, vol. 10, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Powell LM and Nguyen BT (2013). Fast-food and Full-service Restaurant Consumption Among Children and Adolescents: Effect on Energy, Beverage, and Nutrient Intake. *JAMA Pediatr*, vol. 167, pp. 14-20.

<sup>3</sup>Batada A and Wootan MG. *Kids' Meals II: Obesity on the Menu*. Washington, D.C.: CSPI, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Ludwig DS, et al (2001). Relation between Consumption of Sugar-Sweetened Drinks and Childhood Obesity: A Prospective, Observational Analysis. *Lancet*, vol. 357, pp. 505-508.

<sup>5</sup>Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. *Fast Food F.A.C.T.S.* New Haven, CT: Rudd Center, 2013.

<sup>6</sup>Federal Trade Commission [FTC] (2012). *A Review of Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents. Follow Up Report.* <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2012/12/121221foodmarketingreport.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>Kunkel D et al. *Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood: Report of the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004.

<sup>8</sup>Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2006.

<sup>9</sup>Cornwell T, McAlister A (2011). Alternative Thinking about Starting Points of Obesity. Development of Child Taste Preferences. *Appetite*, vol. 56, pp. 428-439.

<sup>10</sup>Otten JJ, et al. Child Food Purchases and Related Attitudes in Response to the 2010 San Francisco County Healthy Food Incentives Ordinance. *American Public Health Association Annual Meeting*; October 30, 2012; San Francisco, CA.