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Children's Meals in Restaurants: Families Need More Help To Make Healthy Choices

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Abstract

Helping families make healthier choices when eating out is important because eating out is a growing and significant part of Americans' diets and eating out is associated with obesity. Although a number of restaurants have announced improvements recently, many restaurant children's meals remain high in calories, saturated fat, and sodium, and default options are often fries and sugary drinks. Behavioral economic interventions that make default options healthy make healthy choices easier and mean that individuals must actively work to engage in less desirable behaviors. Providing healthier default options for children's meals supports parents by reducing barriers to feeding their children healthfully. This article outlines a number of ways to help families make the healthy choice the easy and the default choice for children when eating out.

Eating Out Has a Negative Effect on Children's Diets and Weight

urrently, 1 in 3 American children is overweight or obese, 1 leading to an increased likelihood of becoming overweight in adulthood 2 and to developing serious health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. 3 Although many factors contribute to childhood obesity, research suggests that eating out is one important factor. 4

Helping families make healthier choices when eating out is important because Americans are eating out twice as often as in the 1970s. In 1970, Americans spent just 26% of their food dollars on away-from-home foods.⁵ Today, Americans spend almost half (46%) their food dollars at restaurants.⁶ Children consume about one-third of their calories from eating out,⁷ and about 42% of children aged 2–9 eat fast food on a given day.⁸

Eating out more frequently is associated with obesity, higher body fatness, and higher BMIs, and eating more fast-food meals is linked to eating more calories, fat, saturated fat, and sugary soft drinks and less fruits, vegetables, and milk. Children consume almost twice as many calories, more saturated fat, and less fiber and calcium when they eat out than from home-cooked meals.

Nutritional Quality of Restaurant Children's Meals: The Fault with Defaults

A study of the nation's top 25 chain restaurants found

that 93% of children's meal combinations are too high in calories, 45% are too high in saturated fat, and 86% are too high in sodium. Another study found that only 3% of children's fast-food restaurant meals available in one US city met National School Lunch Program nutrition standards. It

Before McDonald's changed its Happy Meals to include a serving of apple slices and a smaller serving of fries, a national study found that cashiers gave customers French fries 93% of the time with Happy Meals, without even asking. Choices were usually offered for beverages, but soda was the first option offered 78% of the time. ¹² Studies of Burger King, Wendy's, and Taco Bell showed similar results. ¹³ A children's meal with a healthier side dish and beverage (hamburger, apple slices, and apple juice) has one-third fewer calories than the default meal (hamburger, French fries, and a soda).

Healthy Default Options Support Healthy Eating

Studies consistently show that defaults exert a powerful influence on choice, and the default option is more likely to be chosen. For example:

• Automatic enrollment in 401(k) plans increases employee retirement savings enrollment from 75% when employees have to actively enroll in a savings plan to 85–95% with default automatic enrollment plans.¹⁴

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- After controlling for other factors thought to affect donation rates, countries with organ donation as the default policy have 25–30% higher rates of organ donation than countries without default policies.¹⁵
- In an Internet survey, twice as many people (96%) agreed to participate in future surveys if the question was asked with the default as opting in to future surveys as compared to when opting out was the default (48%). 16

Providing healthier default items on menus could lead to healthier food choices and positive health benefits. Behavioral economic interventions that make default options healthy make the healthy choice the easy choice and mean that individuals must actively work to engage in less desirable behaviors.

In a study at Subway restaurants, people who received a default menu highlighting lower-calorie sandwiches were 48% likelier to choose a lower-calorie sandwich than those given a mixed menu that highlighted both low- and high-calorie sandwich options.¹⁷

The Disney Corporation's efforts to offer healthier default items with children's meals at its theme parks have been successful. The company has changed the defaults for beverages to healthy choices, such as 100% juice, water, and low-fat milk, and offers fruits and vegetables as the default side dishes with children's meals. Those changes have been well received; two-thirds of families stick with the healthy children's meal defaults. 18

Providing healthier default options for children's meals supports parents by reducing barriers to feeding their children healthfully.

Actions To Help Families Make Healthy Choices for Children at Restaurants

A number of restaurants recently have announced improvements to their children's meals. McDonald's is shrinking the portion of French fries and including apple slices in all Happy Meals. ¹⁹ Arby's ²⁰ and Darden restaurants, which include Red Lobster and Olive Garden, have announced healthier default options with kids' meals. ²¹ In addition, the National Restaurant Association has started the Kids LiveWell program to help its members improve their children's meals. ²² Nineteen restaurant brands have agreed to offer at least one meal and one item that meet program nutrition criteria.

These changes are a good start, but much more needs to be done to increase the number of healthy options on children's menus and to help families make the healthy choice the easy and the default choice for children when eating out:

 Restaurants should increase the number of healthy options by providing new items and reformulating existing menu items to improve their nutritional quality (including less sodium and more whole grains) and reduce calories.

- Restaurants should offer fruits and vegetables as the default side dishes and low-fat milk or water as the default beverages. Restaurants should remove sugary drinks from children's menus, given that they are the largest source of calories in children's diets²³ and are directly linked to obesity.^{24,25}
- States and localities could encourage healthier children's meals by setting nutrition standards for children's meals that can include toys or other incentives. Santa Clara County and San Francisco are the first to pass such laws.
- More restaurants should join the National Restaurant Association's Kids LiveWell Program, and the National Restaurant Association should require that its nutrition criteria apply to at least 50% of menu items on the children's menus at participating restaurants.
- To ensure that families can make informed choices when eating out, the Food and Drug Administration should finalize strong menu labeling regulations and work with states and localities to enforce them.
- The FDA, CDC, National Restaurant Association, state and local health departments, and health groups should work together on a major national campaign to promote consumer use of calorie labeling at restaurants and encourage healthy choices when eating out.
- Families should recognize that many eating out occurrences are not special occasions and that healthy eating principles should apply to routine restaurant dining. Parents should help children make healthy choices and serve as role models themselves by making healthy choices.

Author Disclosure Statement

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