



Kids' Cuisine

"What would you like
with your fries?"

By Jayne Hurley & Bonnie Liebman

The adults' menu may feature grilled shrimp, charbroiled chicken, sautéed vegetables, and salads galore. But the kids' menu rarely ventures beyond cheeseburgers, pizza, fried chicken fingers, and french fries.

Most restaurants assume that kids don't eat anything else. And—after a steady diet of fast food (even in school cafeterias)—many kids won't. Do any restaurants offer decent kids' foods?

Obesity rates in children have doubled since 1980. While there's no one cause, the restaurant industry's view that kids' food means fast food hasn't helped. Granted, some children are picky eaters. But the more-adventurous youngsters would move beyond fried potatoes and chicken fingers, greasy cheeseburgers, and fatty pizza if they were exposed to healthier foods at an early age. Worldwide, children dig into bowls of beans (Latin America), chickpeas (the Middle East), and vegetables (Asia).

U.S. restaurants serve fingers, burgers, and fries because they're the lowest common denominator, they're familiar, and they're cheap. Cheap for the restaurant, that is. The cost to children who face a greater risk of obesity, diabetes, and (eventually) heart disease and cancer doesn't show up on the menu (nor do calories, sodium, or damaging fat).

Maybe restaurateurs don't know that arteries start to show early signs of heart disease in the second decade of life. Maybe they don't know that children aged two and older need to cut back on saturated and trans fat. Maybe they figure that kids can eat unlimited quantities of fatty, salty, sugary, high-calorie foods and "burn it off."

Maybe it's time they realized that as long as they're feeding children a steady diet of fattening food, their family-friendly reputations aren't worth the crayons and color-your-own placemats they hand out at the door.

Fries & Free Refills

What are the top 20 table-service restaurants feeding our children? Late last year, we found fried chicken (fingers or nuggets) on every one of their kids' menus, a hamburger or cheeseburger on 85 percent, and french fries on all but one (it had hash browns).

In fact, at almost half the chains, fries were the *only* side dish on the kids' menu. Most chains allow you to substitute a (hopefully better) side dish for the fries *if you ask*—but only nine of the 20 menus offered. (For a list of the chains we surveyed, see "The Chain Gang," p. 15.)

Extras make it worse. Kids' meals often come with free (fatty) biscuits or corn bread and a complimentary dessert or beverage. (Why drink water when you can have a free Coke or Pepsi?) At most chains, younger patrons can choose from soda, juice, or milk (typically 2% fat, but it varies from restaurant to restaurant). Half the chains we looked at offer free refills, but only for soda.

A handful of restaurants are starting to change. Like fast-food chains, they may be worried about lawsuits. (McDonald's and Wendy's are test-marketing kids' meals with milk or juice and fruit instead of a soda and fries.)

Or maybe the table-service chains sense a new market. "Young people today have increasingly sophisticated palates," Red Lobster executive chef Keith Keogh told the trade publication *Restaurant Business* in December, when the chain unveiled its new kids' menu.

Young Red Lobster patrons now get a free appetizer of applesauce or fresh carrot sticks and cucumbers with a ranch dipping sauce. And the new entrées—which include Snow Crab Legs, Grilled Mahi-Mahi, and Grilled Chicken—come with steamed vegetables. Gone are the fried shrimp, hamburgers, and cheesesticks, though popcorn shrimp and fried chicken fingers—which both come with french fries—are still on the menu.

To find out what's on kids' menus, we sent dishes from seven of the 20 table-service chains we surveyed to an independent laboratory. We chose one or two chains to represent each dish. They're listed in *italics* following its name. (Unfortunately, the new Red Lobster dishes weren't yet available.)

To estimate how much of a day's worth of calories (or other nutrients) kids' meals supply, we assumed that children should be eating 1,500 calories a day. That's the U.S. Depart-

ment of Agriculture’s suggested calorie intake for “low-active” children aged four to eight. A 1,500-calorie diet has room for only 17 grams a day of harmful (saturated-plus-trans) fat. Both numbers are higher for older or active kids and lower for sedentary kids.

Here, from least to most saturated-plus-trans fat, are the foods we sent to the lab. (Not that bad fats are the sole criteria for judging a healthy meal. A low-fat dinner of white bread and non-whole-grain pasta isn’t exactly ideal.)

One look at the numbers and it’s easy to see why most kids swallow nearly twice as many calories at a restaurant as they do when they eat at home.

Grilled Chicken Tenderloins (Cracker Barrel)

Cracker Barrel, with more than 400 units around the country (though mostly in the South), features homestyle cooking. It’s one of the few restaurants that offer a decent selection of vegetable side dishes. And, like Macaroni Grill and Red Lobster, it’s one of the few that give kids a choice of fried *or* grilled chicken.

Cracker Barrel’s three-ounce portion of grilled chicken tenderloins has only 110 calories and one gram of bad (saturated-plus-trans) fat. While the tenderloins look small, it’s the serving that nutritionists say children (*or* adults, for that matter) should be eating.

Whether kids end up with a healthy meal depends on which of the chain’s 15 side dishes they add and how much of the free corn bread or biscuits they scarf down. The vegetables—like baby carrots, corn, and green beans—add fewer calories, less harmful fat, and more nutrients than the steak fries, hashbrown casserole, or “dumplings,” to name a few. Get the chicken with carrots and a (free) glass of OJ instead of a Coke and your kid ends up with a healthy 320-calorie meal.

Grilled chicken is on virtually every adult menu. Why do so few restaurants bother to offer it to children?

Spaghetti & Tomato Sauce (Olive Garden)

Spaghetti showed up on roughly half of the kids’ menus we surveyed. The 310-calorie entrée is low in saturated-plus-trans fat, and the tomato sauce counts as a vegetable.

At least at Olive Garden, young spaghetti eaters get to share some of the grown-ups’ garden salad. (Just don’t let them share too many 140-calorie garlic bread sticks.) At many chains—Applebee’s, Outback, Ruby Tuesday, and T.G.I. Friday’s, for example—the only side dish on the kids’ menu is fries.

Popcorn Shrimp (Red Lobster)

Red Lobster deserves a pat on the tail for overhauling its children’s menu. But what happens to kids who stick with that old favorite, Popcorn Shrimp? A third of a day’s bad fat and 620 milligrams of sodium, that’s what. Shrimp starts out low in fat, but popcorn shrimp is more breading than seafood. The batter sops up more than two grams of saturated fat and three grams of trans fat in the deep-fat fryer.

And that doesn’t include the french fries that come along for the ride. Red Lobster’s fries are among the worst we found. Each one-cup serving adds nine grams of artery-clogging fat—about as much as a medium fries at Burger King. Total damage for the Popcorn Shrimp plus fries (but not the free appetizer or Cheddar Bay Biscuits): 430 calories, 1,310 mg of sodium, and 14 grams of bad fat (three grams shy of a day’s worth).

Macaroni & Cheese (Chili’s)

Chili’s No Baloney Macaroni ‘n Cheese looks exactly like Kraft’s. It delivers six grams of saturated-plus-trans fat, the same as five Burger King Chicken Tenders. But the Mac ‘n Cheese has about twice the calories (420) and sodium (910 mg).

The only good news: at most chains, the dish comes without fries. But who needs 400 calories’ worth of white flour, margarine, cheese, and salt?

Ribs (Chili’s)

Ribs aren’t as bad as they sound, because the typical half-rack on the kids’ menu has only about 3½ ounces of meat on the bone. But that doesn’t make them a bargain. While they’ve got nowhere near the 21 grams of saturated-plus-trans fat of an adult portion, their seven grams are 40 percent of a day’s limit for children.

Worse yet, the ribs come surrounded by fries. At Chili’s, that doubles the bad fat (to 13 grams) and the calories (to 630). That’s like getting a McDonald’s Happy Meal with a Quarter Pounder instead of a Hamburger.

Grilled Cheese (Denny’s)

Grilled cheese appeared on 90 percent of the kids’ menus we surveyed. Denny’s The Big Cheese seems to be made with just one slice of cheese. But that still adds up to 310 calories, 790 mg of sodium, and more than a third of a day’s bad fat.



Grilled chicken or fish and steamed vegetables on a children’s menu? Red Lobster takes the lead.



Factor in the fries that just about every chain serves and the total comes to 720 calories and 15 grams of saturated-plus-trans fat. That's like a McDonald's Happy Meal with a Big Mac instead of a Hamburger.

To its credit, Denny's offers a vegetable of the day or apple-sauce instead of fries with every kid's meal (if you notice the asterisk on the menu).

Hamburger (Denny's)

Kids' burgers range from normal to huge. Denny's hamburger (it's actually a Cheeseburgerlicious without the cheese) weighs the same as a McDonald's Hamburger, which puts it at the normal end. But it still delivers seven grams of saturated-plus-trans fat.

Of course, once you add the fries, your child is facing a plate of 720 calories and almost a whole day's worth of artery sludge (15 grams). Lobby for the vegetable of the day instead.

Chicken Fingers (Chili's)

Chili's Little Chicken Crispers aren't so little. The three pieces add up to 360 calories, 980 milligrams of sodium, four grams of sat fat, plus another four grams of trans fat. That's anything but kid-sized.

All that trans—courtesy of the partially hydrogenated frying oil—makes chicken as bad for your arteries as a Quarter Pounder. At Chili's, the kids' fries essentially double the calories (to 710) and the artery-clogging fat (to 15 grams). That's par for the course for kids' meals.

Cheeseburger (Denny's)

Denny's Cheeseburgerlicious is about the same (modest) size as a McDonald's Cheeseburger. So most parents would never guess that it's got close to half a day's saturated-plus-trans fat (eight grams).

With fries, the meal hits 760 calories and 16 grams of heart-damaging fat—about what an adult would get from a Pizza Hut Personal Pan Italian Sausage Pizza.

Cheese Pizza (Olive Garden)

Pizza's a regular on kids' menus. Olive Garden's is smaller (about seven ounces) than a Pizza Hut Personal Pan Cheese Pizza (nine ounces). But your youngster still

walks away with 420 calories, close to half a day's saturated-plus-trans fat (thanks largely to the cheese), and 1,130 mg of sodium.

At least pizza doesn't come with fries. And at Olive Garden, kids can share the generous bowl of salad that comes to the table. No such luck at most other chains.

Grilled Cheese (Applebee's)

More cheese and grilling grease help explain why Applebee's Grilled Cheese sandwich has twice the harmful fat of Denny's The Big Cheese.

It also explains why children consume 520 calories and 14 grams of saturated-plus-trans fat in their innocent-looking grilled cheese sandwich. If it comes with fries, your kid will waddle out of the restaurant with 900 calories plus 2,050 milligrams of sodium and more than a day's worth of bad fat (21 grams). That's like eating three pork chops.

And those numbers don't include the complimentary beverage (soda or milk)...or the expensive weight-loss camp that Applebee's young patrons may soon be seeking.

Macaroni & Cheese (Cracker Barrel)

Some chains—like Bennigan's, Big Boy, and Coco's—serve Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. Others, like Cracker Barrel, pride themselves on home cooking. They use Velveeta.

That ups the saturated-plus-trans fat to 16 grams—about a day's worth. As if that weren't bad enough, the sodium hits 1,100 mg (close to half a day's limit).

Kids may start out with normal blood pressure, but odds are it will creep up as they get older. By the time they hit 60, half of those adorable tykes may need drugs to lower their blood pressure.

Cheeseburger (Outback Steakhouse)

No Happy-Meal-sized cheeseburger at a steakhouse like Outback. Its quarter-pound Boomerang Cheese Burger delivers 470 calories, 940 milligrams of sodium, and a day's worth of saturated-plus-trans fat (18 grams). Think of it as the 12-ounce sirloin steak the grown-ups are eating...with three pats of butter melted on top.

Outback's fries are special, too. The company fries in a beef tallow blend, which gives each order 13 grams of saturated-plus-trans fat.



Would you like anything with your fries? Good luck finding a healthy meal on Applebee's kids' menu.



Small Fries

Best Bites have no more than two grams of saturated-plus-trans fat. The chart shows each entrée

with the side dishes offered on the kids' menu (except for Cracker Barrel, where we picked baby carrots to go with the grilled chicken). The chart also shows a few meals with complimentary beverages. Items are ranked from least to most saturated-plus-trans fat in the main dish. Numbers for the dishes in **bold** come from independent laboratory analyses.

Kids' Meals

	Calories	Total Fat (grams)	Saturated+Trans Fat (grams)	Sodium (milligrams)
✓✓ Cracker Barrel Grilled Chicken Tenderloins (3 oz.)	110	2	1	290
✓✓ with Carrots (2/3 cup)	160	4	1	400
✓✓ with Carrots and Orange Juice (12 fl. oz.)	320	5	1	400
✓✓ Olive Garden Spaghetti & Tomato Sauce (1 1/4 cups)	310	3	1	570
✓✓ with Garden Salad (1 cup) and Italian Dressing (2 Tbs.)	420	11	2	1,130
Red Lobster Popcorn Shrimp (2 1/2 oz.)	160	9	6	620
with Fries (1 cup)	430	23	14	1,310
with Fries and Applesauce (2/3 cup)	590	23	14	1,360
Chili's No Baloney Macaroni 'n Cheese (1 1/4 cups)	420	12	6	910
Chili's Ribs (5 ribs—1/2 rack)	280	17	7	370
with Fries (1 1/3 cups)	630	33	13	590
Denny's The Big Cheese (grilled cheese) (3 oz.)	310	16	7	790
with Vegetable of the Day (1/2 cup)	330	17	7	860
with Applesauce (2/3 cup)	440	16	7	840
with Fries (1 1/3 cups)	720	37	15	910

Denny's Cheeseburgerlicious without cheese (3 1/2 oz.)	310	15	7	280
with Vegetable of the Day (1/2 cup)	340	16	7	350
with Applesauce (2/3 cup)	440	15	7	330
with Fries (1 1/3 cups)	720	36	15	400

Chili's Little Chicken Crispers (3 fingers—5 1/2 oz.)	360	20	8	980
with Fries (1 1/3 cups)	710	36	15	1,200

Denny's Cheeseburgerlicious (4 oz.)	350	17	8	490
with Vegetable of the Day (1/2 cup)	380	19	9	560
with Applesauce (2/3 cup)	480	18	9	540
with Fries (1 1/3 cups)	760	39	16	610

Olive Garden Cheese Pizza (1 pizza—7 oz.)	420	18	8	1,130
with Garden Salad (1 cup) and Italian Dressing (2 Tbs.)	540	26	9	1,700

Applebee's Grilled Cheese (5 1/2 oz.)	520	26	14	1,350
with Fries (1 1/3 cups)	900	44	21	2,050
with Fries and Coke (12 fl. oz.)	1,020	44	21	2,060

Cracker Barrel Macaroni n' Cheese (1 1/2 cups)	430	29	16	1,100
with whole milk (12 fl. oz.)	650	41	23	1,260

Outback Steakhouse Boomerang Cheese Burger (7 oz.)	470	32	18	940
with Fries (1 2/3 cups)	840	56	31	1,450
with Fries and Coke (14 fl. oz.)	970	56	31	1,460

Outback Steakhouse Spotted Dog Sundae with Chocolate Sauce (10 oz.)	730	42	27	180
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✓✓ Best Bite.

Daily limits for low-active children ages 4-8: **Calories:** 1,500. **Total Fat:** 50 grams. **Saturated+Trans Fat:** 17 grams. **Sodium:** 2,400 milligrams.

Sources: CSPI, independent laboratory analyses, company information, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp).

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The Chain Gang: The 20 chains we surveyed for this article: Applebee's, Bennigan's, Big Boy, Bob Evans, Chili's, Coco's, Cracker Barrel, Denny's, Friendly's, IHOP, Macaroni Grill, Olive Garden, Outback Steakhouse, Perkins, Red Lobster, Ruby Tuesday, Shoney's, Steak 'n Shake, T.G.I. Friday's, and Waffle House.

To your heart, that's worse than having a filet mignon with your butter-topped sirloin. Total damage for the Boomerang plus Fries: 840 calories, 1,450 mg of sodium, and close to two days' worth of artery-busting fat. And that's without dessert or the (free) beverage and bread and butter.

Ice Cream Sundae (Outback Steakhouse)

Nearly every kids' menu features an ice cream sundae. At Friendly's and Macaroni Grill, it comes with every meal. The restaurants are only trying to let kids have some fun.

Outback's Spotted Dog Sundae delivers 27 grams of saturated fat and 730 calories' worth of fun. It's a typical sundae—ice cream, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream.

A sundae is one heckuva splurge. No other single item on most kids' menus has 1 1/2 days' worth of artery-clogging fat. At Outback, ordering a sundae is little different than ordering a Boomerang Cheese Burger and Fries.

And kids who eat a cheeseburger, fries, Coke, and sundae will be sitting down to a stunning 1,700 calories and 58 grams of saturated-plus-trans fat. That's 3 1/2 days' worth of artery gunk—even more than an order of fettuccine Alfredo. Shouldn't parents know that their kids are eating a "heart attack on a plate"? 🍷

The information for this article was compiled by Tamar Genger, Heather Jones, and Sarah Wade, with help from Nicole Ferring.