

# Ensuring Healthy Restaurant Kids' Meals

## *The Power of Nutrition Standards*

Restaurants are a key source of food for American families. Families with children consume food away from home four to five times a week on average.<sup>i</sup> Between 2015 and 2018, children ages 2-11 years old consumed an average of 11.4% of their daily calories from fast food alone, not accounting for food from other types of restaurants.<sup>ii</sup> A 2021 national survey found that one in six parents say their child eats fast food at least twice a week.<sup>iii</sup>

Much of the food offered on restaurant kids' menus is unhealthy and does not meet expert nutrition standards.<sup>iv</sup> Advocates across the U.S. are addressing this issue through legislation to ensure families have healthy options on restaurant kids' menus.<sup>v</sup>

### *The State of Restaurant Kids' Meals*

Caregivers frequently order kids' meals for their children,<sup>vi</sup> and it is not easy to find healthy options on restaurant kids' menus. Fried chicken, burgers, and fried potatoes are common kids' offerings, while healthier options like grilled chicken and non-fried vegetables are harder to come by.<sup>vii</sup>

- When children eat at restaurants, they consume more calories, saturated fat, total sugars, and sugary drinks compared to days they do not eat at restaurants.<sup>viii</sup> Food from restaurants contains more saturated fat and sodium and less calcium, iron, and fiber than food prepared at home.<sup>ix</sup>
- A 2018 analysis of kids' meal combinations at the top 50 U.S. restaurant chains (as ranked by revenue) found that, among the chains with kids' menus, 71.9% of kids' meals did not meet expert nutrition standards for calories, total fat, saturated fat and trans fat combined, and sodium, and 44.7% of restaurants did not offer a single kids' meal that met the nutrition standards.<sup>x</sup>
- Both caregivers and children themselves want healthier kids' meals in restaurants.
  - In a survey of caregivers, of those who did not purchase kids' meals for their children, 37% responded they would be more willing to purchase kids' meals if healthier options were available in restaurants.<sup>xi</sup>
  - One survey found that, among children who reported ordering a kids' meal, 56.2% of kids ages 8-12 were somewhat or very likely to order a kids' meal that came with vegetables and 78.9% reported they were somewhat or very likely to order a kids' meal that came with fruit.<sup>xii</sup>

## Success Stories

Several restaurants have made their kids' meals healthier.

- In 2018, McDonald's launched its Global Happy Meal Nutrition Criteria. The chain committed that at least 50% of the Happy Meals listed on its menus in each market would be less than or equal to 600 calories, with no more than 10% of calories from saturated fat or added sugars each, and less than 650mg of sodium by 2022.<sup>xiii</sup> By June of 2018, 100% of U.S. Happy Meals would meet the calorie, saturated fat, and added sugars standards, and 78% would meet the sodium standard.<sup>xiv</sup> A 2023 review of McDonald's commitment found the following changes to the average nutritional profile of Happy Meals across its 20 major markets:<sup>xv</sup>
  - The average number of calories decreased from 472 calories in 2018 to 443 in 2022, a decrease of 6%.
  - The average amount of sodium decreased from 634mg in 2018 to 578mg in 2022, a decrease of 9%.
  - The average amount of saturated fat decreased from 4.7g in 2018 to 4g in 2022, a decrease of 15%.
  - The average amount of added sugars decreased from 6.8g in 2018 to 5g in 2022, a decrease of 26%.
- In 2006, the Walt Disney Company updated its kids' menus at its US theme parks and resorts and made the default sides and drinks that came with kids' meals healthier. Customers could substitute less healthy sides and drinks upon request when ordering. An analysis of the menu change found that customers stuck with the healthy default side item 47.9% of the time.<sup>xvi</sup> The Walt Disney Company has also introduced nutrition standards for healthy meals. Meals that have no more than 600 calories, 10% of calories from saturated fat, 0g of trans fat, 10% of calories from added sugars, and 740mg of sodium are marked with the Disney Check, flagging these healthier items for families.<sup>xvii,xviii</sup>
- The National Restaurant Association has established its voluntary Kids LiveWell program to promote healthier options on kids' menus. Participating restaurants agree to offer at least two meals and two side dishes that meet nutrition standards and make healthy beverages, like water and low-fat milk, the automatic beverage offering with a kids' meal. Participating restaurants can indicate which meals are Kids LiveWell approved on their menus. Current participants include Burger King, Chipotle, and Denny's.<sup>xix</sup>

It's not just major corporations who have made these changes.

- In 2012, the Silver Diner, a small, mid-Atlantic restaurant chain, implemented a healthier kids' menu. In a study assessing purchasing patterns before and after the menu change, researchers found:<sup>xx</sup>
  - Orders of healthy entrees increased from 3.1% prior to the menu change to 45.7% after implementation. Orders of healthy entrees remained high at 44.6% and 43% in two seven-month follow-up periods one year and two years after the initial evaluation.
  - Prior to the menu change, 38% of side dishes ordered with kids' meals were healthy items. This increased to 74% post-implementation and remained high at or above 74% in the two follow-up periods.

### *Policy Momentum*

While some restaurants have taken action to improve the nutritional quality of kids' meals, they are outliers in the industry, and more sweeping policy changes are needed to make it easier for families to access healthy options at restaurants.

- In Maryland, three communities have passed healthy kids' meals policies – Prince George's County,<sup>xxi</sup> Montgomery County,<sup>xxii</sup> and Charles County.<sup>xxiii</sup>
  - All three counties require restaurants to serve at least one kids' meal that meets expert nutrition standards. This includes standards for calories, saturated fat, and sodium, and requirements for food groups, including fruit, vegetables, and whole grains.
  - All three counties require restaurants with kids' menus to serve healthy default beverages, meaning the beverage automatically offered with a kids' meal must be water, 100% juice, or non-fat or low-fat milk, instead of sugary drinks, like soda and lemonade.
- More than two dozen jurisdictions have also passed healthy default beverage policies.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- If you're ready to join the healthy kids' meals movement, CSPI's [kids' meals toolkit](#) has everything you need to get started on a campaign. It is critical that passed policies are implemented and enforced to ensure they can have the intended impact – you can review CSPI's Implementation and Enforcement toolkit for more details.

Healthy Kids' Meal policies ensure that there are healthy options for kids at restaurants, no matter where their family chooses to eat.

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*For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at [policy@cspinet.org](mailto:policy@cspinet.org).*

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- <sup>xxi</sup> Prince George's County, MD., Code §§ 12-215 to 12-218.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Montgomery County, MD., Code § 15-15C.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Charles County, MD., Code § 35-1.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> CSPI, 2024.