Restaurant Children’s Meals: The Need for Healthier Beverages

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 restaurant foods and beverages. This trend is of public health concern because consumption of restaurant food is associated with increased caloric intake and poorer diets.

The vast majority of kids’ meals include high-calorie, low-nutrition, 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%).
- 74% of the top 50 restaurant chains promote sugary drinks through kids’ menus, down from 93% in 2008. When looking at restaurant chains by number of locations, this translates to 43% of restaurant outlets.

Despite the health risks associated with soda and other sugary drink consumption, the majority of the top restaurant chains’ default beverage with a kids’ meal is a sugary drink. Defaults are the option people automatically receive if they do not choose something else. Changing the default from unhealthy options to healthier ones supports healthy eating for children. With one in three children not at a healthy weight, sugary drinks should not be a default beverage in restaurant meals for young children.

- Evidence from a wide range of fields (including retirement plans, organ donation, and food/nutrition) shows that people tend to stick with defaults and that setting beneficial defaults has high rates of acceptability. When Walt Disney theme parks switched to healthier beverage defaults, parents stuck with the healthier option 66% of the time, even though trips to theme parks are typically special occasions and more indulgent options were available.
- Soda, lemonade, juice drinks, sports drinks, and other sugary drinks are one of the largest sources of calories in children’s diets, providing nearly half of children’s added sugars intake, and do not typically provide any positive nutritional value.
- Children who drink sugary drinks have greater odds of being at an unhealthy weight than those who consume little or no sugary drinks.
Consumption of sugary drinks can displace healthier foods in children’s diets, like low-fat milk, which, unlike sugary drinks, provides key nutrients including protein, calcium, potassium, magnesium, vitamin D, and vitamin A.\textsuperscript{10}

A study conducted at Tufts University found that for each additional 8 oz. increase in sugary drink consumption per day, a child’s chances of having severe early childhood dental caries—decayed or missing teeth—increases by up to 139\%.\textsuperscript{11}

**Fast-food companies target children with more than $580 million worth of marketing each year**, promoting products, brands, and toy premiums to children as young as 2 years old.\textsuperscript{12} Restaurants market to children in schools, on television, on the internet, and in their restaurants, among other places. They 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.\textsuperscript{13}

**Support Parents, Protect Kids**

Restaurants undermine parents’ ability to feed their children healthfully when they directly market unhealthy food choices to children and make them a default option. Restaurants should work with parents, not against them.

Restaurants have made some progress in improving children’s meals, but progress has been modest and slow. Several fast-food restaurants have taken the positive step of featuring only healthy beverages with children’s meals, including McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, Dairy Queen, IHOP, Applebee’s, and Jack in the Box, joining Subway, and Panera, which also do not include sugary drinks on their kids’ menus.\textsuperscript{14}

Between 2008 and 2012, the percentage of restaurant children’s meals meeting nutrition standards increased from 1\% to just 3\%.\textsuperscript{3} Thus, states and localities are nudging restaurants to do better. As of January 2018, nine localities in California and one in Colorado have adopted ordinances to improve the nutritional quality of restaurant children’s meals. The cities of Berkeley,\textsuperscript{15} Davis,\textsuperscript{16} Stockton,\textsuperscript{17} Perris,\textsuperscript{18} Cathedral City\textsuperscript{19}, Santa Clara County,\textsuperscript{20} Long Beach,\textsuperscript{21} Daly City,\textsuperscript{22} and Lafayette (Colorado)\textsuperscript{23} require that restaurants in their jurisdictions offer only healthier beverages as the defaults that come with children’s meals. All ordinances have passed with the support of city officials and residents.\textsuperscript{24} Additionally, San Francisco and Santa Clara County have laws that set nutrition standards for restaurant children’s meals that are sold with toys.\textsuperscript{25}

Municipalities generally have the authority to regulate commercial products and practices to protect the public’s health, safety, and general welfare. The restaurant industry’s voluntary efforts are commendable but do not do enough to ensure that restaurants serve predominantly healthy foods and beverages to children.

*For more information, contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest:*

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18. Perris Ordinance 1340 (2017) (to be codified as Chapter 7.46).
22. Daly City Ordinance No. 1415 (2018) (to be codified as 8.72).