

The National Movement to Improve Restaurant Children's Meals

Organizations and academic experts are encouraging improvements to restaurant children's meals at the local, state, and national level. Although leading restaurant chains and state and local jurisdictions have made progress in recent years, more is needed.

Eating out has nutrition and health consequences for adults, but children are especially vulnerable. When children eat out, they typically consume more calories, added sugars, and sugary drinks and fewer fruits, vegetables, and whole grains than when they eat at home.¹

Communities across the country are adopting healthier restaurant children's meal policies.

Contributing to soda's gradual disappearance from restaurant children's menus is the growing number of states and localities that have enacted healthy kids' meal policies. These policies ensure that restaurants are offering healthier default, or automatic, beverages as part of their bundled meals. States and localities can also choose to include improvements to default side options or set nutrition standards for kids' meals to ensure the full meal is healthy.

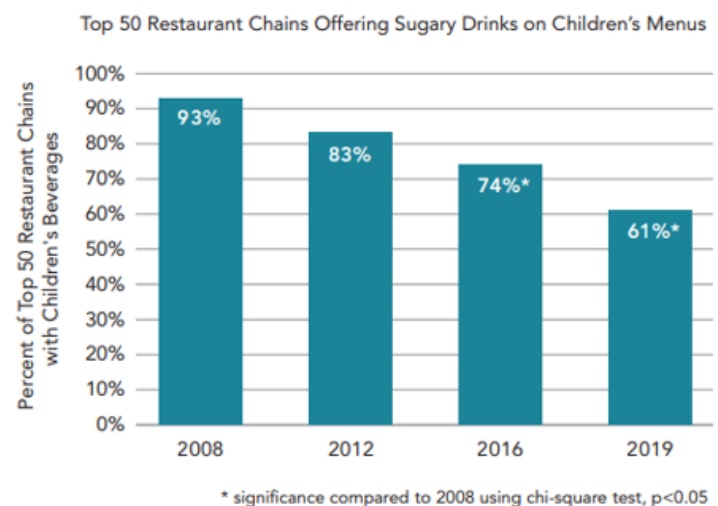
In 2018, California became the first to pass a statewide policy, requiring chains to make healthier beverages like water or milk the default drink offered with children's meals.² Since then Hawaii and Delaware have also passed policies. Additionally, more than 15 localities including New York City, Baltimore, Louisville, Philadelphia, and Cleveland have enacted similar measures. In November 2020, Prince George's County, MD passed a policy that ensures that healthier beverages and sides are the default with restaurant children's meals and that at least one kids' meal on the menu will meet expert nutrition standards.

Many of the biggest restaurants nationwide are improving their children's menus.

In 2013, McDonald's became the first major restaurant chain to agree to stop listing sugary beverages on its children's menus.³ Since then, Burger King, Wendy's, Dairy Queen, Jack in the Box, Olive Garden, Chipotle and nearly 20 others have made similar commitments.⁴ Public health organizations are encouraging all restaurants to stop using their children's menus to push sugary drinks on their youngest customers.

Fewer restaurants had soda, lemonade, and other sugary beverages on their children's menus in 2019 than in 2008. However, the majority (61 percent) of top 50 restaurant chains still push sugary beverages for kids.⁵

In an expanded analysis of the top 200 chains (135 chains of which had children's menus), 83 percent offered soda or another sugary drink on the children's menu. Because the biggest chains have the most outlets, a proportionately larger number of outlets (58 percent) no longer offer soda or sugary drinks on kids' menus.



In addition to addressing beverages, some restaurants are improving the nutritional quality of foods for children. McDonald's and Walt Disney theme parks have changed to healthier default sides with their children's meals. McDonald's adopted nutrition standards for all Happy Meals with limits on calories, saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars.⁶ Disney's healthy defaults resulted in 21 percent fewer calories compared to meals with unhealthy side dish and beverage defaults.⁷

Nationwide, more than 100 companies participate in the National Restaurant Association's Kids LiveWell program. Participating restaurants offer one meal combination and one side dish that meet standards, including for calories, saturated fat, and sodium. In early 2020, the National Restaurant Association strengthened their Kids LiveWell program to include two meals and two side dishes that meet standards. The program now also requires participating restaurants to have healthy default beverages with all kids' meals.⁸ This update is expected to help build further momentum for voluntary healthy kids' meals.

For more information or for technical assistance to implement restaurant children's meal policies, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

¹ Powell LM, Nguyen BT. Fast-food and Full-service Restaurant Consumption among Children and Adolescents. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2012;167(1):14-20

² Center for Science in the Public Interest. State and Local Restaurant Kids' Meal Policies. July 2019.

https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/CSPI%20chart%20of%20local%20km%20policies%20July%202019_1.pdf

³ Center for Science in the Public Interest and Voices for Healthy Kids' Action Center. *Six Down, Many to Go.* 2016.

http://www.foodmarketing.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/six_down_many_to_go_print_version.pdf.

⁴ Ribakove S, Wootan MW. Soda Still on the Menu: Progress, but More to Do to Get Soda off Restaurant Children's Menus.

July 2019. <https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/Soda%20Still%20on%20the%20Menu%202019.pdf>

⁵ Ribakove, 2019.

⁶ Alliance for a Healthier Generation. McDonald's Announces Global Commitment to Support Families with Increased Focus on Happy Meals. Feb 15, 2018. <https://www.healthiergeneration.org/articles/mcdonalds-announces-global-commitment-to-support-families-with-increased-focus-on-happy>.

⁷ Peters J, Beck J, Lande J, et al. Using Healthy Defaults in Walt Disney World Restaurants to Improve Nutrition. *The Behavioral Science of Eating.* 2016(1):92-103.

⁸ National Restaurant Association. Kids LiveWell. <https://restaurant.org/KidsLiveWell>