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*Nutrition Action Healthletter* (ISSN 0885-7792) is published 10 times a year (monthly except bi-monthly in Jan./Feb. and Jul./Aug.).

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MEMO FROM MFJ

# Ronald: Stop Tempting Kids with Toys



Neither McDonald's Corporation nor its Happy Meals existed when I was a little kid, so I can't say how I would have been affected by their marketing. But I assure you that millions of children have been captivated by McDonald's not-so-clever gimmick of using toys to get them to pester their parents to drive to the Golden Arches.

The company's strategy is doubly insidious when its commercials encourage youngsters to "collect the whole series." In the 1990s, McDonald's waved 101 little dog toys (plus one of Cruella De Vil) in front of kids when it used the movie "101 Dalmatians" to lure customers to its stores.

What makes McDonald's version of "Toys for Tots" triply bad is that its food isn't exactly what you'd call healthful. Happy Meals are too high in calories and sodium, the buns don't contain a speck of whole wheat flour, and, if the meal includes a soft drink, it delivers two days' worth of sugar.

Junk-food companies love to sanctimoniously opine about parental responsibility. And I agree that parents should tell Jenny and Johnny, "We're eating at home tonight." But few parents want to be saying "no" each time a TV ad unleashes a new wave of "pester power."

Roy Bergold, who was McDonald's advertising head for 29 years, apparently agrees. "Parents should totally control their kids. Yeah, right," he told *QSR Magazine* in June.

Bergold cited a survey showing that "the average kid asks his parent for something nine times before the parent gives in....What's a mother to do under this assault?"

Here's what we're doing.

In June, the Centre for Science in the Public Interest (the publisher of *Nutrition Action*) told McDonald's that it would file a lawsuit in the United States unless the company dropped the toy gimmick or was willing to negotiate.

We contended that it's unfair and deceptive to dangle toys in front of kids to get them to nag their parents to go to McDonald's.

Insiders are remarkably frank when they talk about toys. "Happy Meals proved that you could actually 'brand' a meal and make children harass their parents for it," says consumer-marketing guru Adam Hanft.

"We knew that we needed the toy to make it work," says Joe Johnston, who was on the advertising-agency team in the early 1970s that invented the McDonald's Fun Meal, which later added a toy and became the Happy Meal.



Happy Meals and their toys make for happy profits... and unhealthy kids.

In May, the World Health Assembly (including the government of Canada) endorsed

a Norwegian resolution calling on all member states to curb advertising for nutrient-poor foods and beverages.

Minister of Health Leona Aglukkaq owes it to Canadian kids to extend Quebec's ban on advertising to children to the rest of Canada (and to close some of its loopholes).

McDonald's says that it is "proud of our long heritage of responsible communication with our customers, especially children..." And its Happy Meals Web site assures parents that "You want the very best for your kids, and so do we."

That's malarkey.

McDonald's wants your money—and it will manipulate your kids any which way to get it.

*Michael F. Jacobson*  
Michael F. Jacobson, PhD  
Executive Director

Centre for Science in the Public Interest

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The Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is the non-profit health-advocacy group that publishes *Nutrition Action Healthletter*. CSPI mounts educational programs and presses for changes in government and corporate policies.

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