

Un-Happy Meals

Toy Giveaways with Restaurant Children's Meals

Fast-food companies target children and adolescents with \$520 million worth of marketing each year, promoting products, brands, and toy premiums to kids as young as 2 years old.¹

- Toy giveaways make up more than half (\$360 million) of that money, a marketing expenditure second only to TV advertising.¹
- Fast-food restaurants sell more than 1.2 billion children's meals with toys each year.¹
- Two-thirds of child-targeted advertising during preschool programming promotes fast-food restaurants.²



Marketing undermines children's diets and health

Food and beverage marketing, including toy giveaways, influences children's food preferences, food choices, diets, and health.³

Preschool-aged children recognize and prefer fast food and soda brands that are extensively marketed to them.⁴ 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.⁴

Children under the age of 8 are unable to comprehend that the intent of advertising is to persuade them.³ The practice of enticing children to desire unhealthy meals using the prospect of getting a toy manipulates children's inherent trust and lack of developmental maturity.

Several fast-food companies already have nutrition standards for their advertising. They also should have standards for children's meals marketed using toys.



The vast majority of kids' meals contain calorie-dense, nutritionally-poor foods as the default.

- The overwhelming majority (93%) of children's meals at the nation's largest chain restaurants are high in calories; many also are high in sodium (86%) and saturated fat (45%).⁵
- In a national study on default options offered with McDonald's Happy Meals, cashiers gave customers French fries 93% of the time, without even asking. Choices were usually offered for beverages, but soda was the first option offered 78% of the time.⁶ Studies of Burger King, Wendy's, and Taco Bell show similar results.⁷

Support Parents, Protect Kids

Parents' responsibility and ability to feed their children healthfully is undermined by the marketing directed at their children and by others who also feed children and influence their food choices. Restaurants should work with parents, not against them.

Several fast-food restaurants have taken the positive step of advertising children's meals with healthier options, like apple slices, applesauce, and low-fat milk. Just as fast-food restaurants apply nutrition standards to the meals they advertise, they also should apply standards to the meals they sell with toys.



San Francisco and Santa Clara counties (California) set nutrition standards for restaurant children's meals that can come with toys.

Setting nutrition standards for the children's meals that restaurants offer with toys supports healthy choices for children by:

- ✓ Encouraging restaurants to provide healthier options on children's menus
- ✓ Restricting the marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrition foods to children
- ✓ Preventing companies from undermining parents' efforts to feed children healthfully
- ✓ Supporting parents in choosing healthy meals and snacks for their kids

Disassociating toys and other rewards from unhealthy foods is a combined responsibility that should involve states, localities, and restaurants, as well as parents. Given the sky-high rates of childhood obesity and the restaurant industry's failure to address toy giveaways with children's meals, states and localities can support parents in helping children make healthy food choices by implementing nutrition standards for children's meals that can be sold with toys.

Municipalities generally have the authority to regulate commercial products and practices to protect the public's health, safety, and general welfare. Addressing restaurant children's meals is a basic exercise of this authority.

Nutrition standards for toy giveaways with children's meals are not big government interfering with parental responsibility. Parents have the right to guide their children's food choices without so much interference from big food corporations.

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¹ Federal Trade Commission [FTC] (2008). *Marketing Food to Children and Adolescents. A Review of Industry Expenditures, Activities, and Self-Regulation. A Report to Congress.* <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2008/07/P064504foodmktgreport.pdf>

² Connor, SM. (2006). Food-related Advertising on Preschool Television: Building Brand Recognition in Young Viewers. *Pediatrics*, vol. 118, pp. 1478-1485.

³ Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?*, Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2006.

⁴ Cornwell T, McAlister A. (2011) Alternative Thinking about Starting Points of Obesity. Development of Child Taste Preferences. *Appetite*, vol. 56, pp. 428-439.

⁵ Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). *Kids' Meals: Obesity on the Menu.* Washington, D.C.: CSPI, 2008.

⁶ Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). *Default Options with Happy Meals.* Washington, D.C.: CSPI, 2008.

⁷ Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. *Fast Food F.A.C.T.S.* New Haven, CT: Rudd Center, 2010.