

Restaurant Children's Meals: The Faults with Unhealthy Defaults

de-fault (di fáwlt) n. A choice automatically made by someone else.

During 2015-2018, 36.3% of youth aged 2-19 years consumed fast food on a given day.¹ During the same time period, children aged 2-11 years consumed an average of 11.4% of their daily calories from fast food.² Children typically consume about 125 more calories on days when they eat a meal at a fast-food restaurant.³

Research shows that people are more likely to choose an option when it is presented as the default. Even when people can “opt out,” they are more likely to stick with the default than they are to select the same option on their own. Yet, the default options for side dishes and drinks with restaurant children's meals are often unhealthy. Providing healthier default options for children's meals is crucial. Healthy defaults support parents by reducing barriers to feeding their children healthfully.

The Power of Defaults

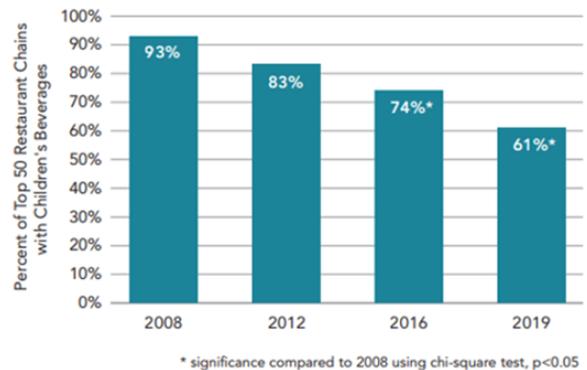
Studies on retirement savings, health insurance, organ donation, and food consumption show that people often stick with the default option.^{4,5,6,7,8} They also show high acceptability of beneficial defaults.⁹ People lead such busy lives, especially parents, so it can be hard to recognize the choices that are made for us and change them as we see fit. For example, it's easier to accept the bundled kids' meal that comes with a sugary beverage and french fries, than to alter the order to include a water or low-fat milk and apple slices.

Healthy Default Options Support Healthy Eating

Making the standard default options healthier helps people eat healthfully at restaurants.

- Children's meals with healthier defaults at Walt Disney theme parks resulted in 21% fewer calories compared to children's meals with unhealthy defaults.¹⁰ Parents stuck with healthy side dishes 48% of the time and healthier beverages 66% of the time, even though trips to theme parks are typically special occasions and more indulgent options were available.¹¹
- When a large fast-food restaurant changed the default sides for its children's meals by reducing the size of the fries and adding apple slices automatically, the calories in the average children's meal purchased decreased by 19%.¹²
- A 2015 study reported that sales of strawberry and vegetable sides and milk increased and sales of french fries and soda decreased after a regional chain restaurant implemented a healthier children's menu.¹³

Figure 1. Top 50 Restaurant Chains Offering Sugary Drinks on Children's Menu

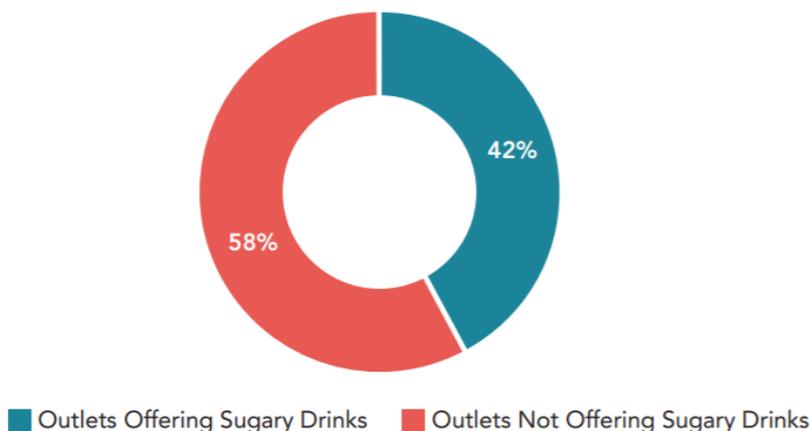


- At McDonald’s, the change of the default beverage resulted in 21 million more low-fat and fat-free milk jugs and 100% apple juice boxes sold over a period of 11 months compared to the same period a year earlier.¹⁴ Further, between 2013 when McDonald’s began offering healthy default beverages and 2018, the share of Happy Meals served with milk, water, or juice increased by 15 percentage points.¹⁵
- A 2015 study reported that more than half the children ages 8 to 12 surveyed who order children’s meals said that they would be somewhat or very likely to order a children’s meal that came with vegetables (56%) or fruits (79%).¹⁶

All Restaurants Should Provide Healthy Options as the Default in Children’s Meals

- [Some chain restaurants](#) are offering and advertising children’s meals with fruit and vegetable side dishes, such as apple slices, and healthy beverage offerings such as water, seltzer, low-fat milk, or 100% juice.
- However, a CSPI study of the nation’s top 50 chain restaurants found that 71.9% of children’s meal combinations do not meet expert nutrition standards.¹⁷
- The proportion of top restaurants that offer fruit and/or vegetables as a side has increased from 68.2% in 2008 to 86.8% in 2018.¹⁸ However, one study concluded that only 40% of the top fast-food and 20% of full-service restaurants always include a fruit or vegetable as the default side dish.¹⁹
- Approximately 25 top restaurant chains have children’s menus free from sugary drinks, yet the majority of largest chain restaurants still have sugary drinks on their kids’ menu.²⁰ Among the top 50 restaurant chains with kids’ menus, the number of restaurants promoting sugary drinks on kids’ menus declined from 93% in 2008 to 61% in 2019 (Figure 1).²¹
- Many of the largest restaurant chains, which operate a larger number of outlets, have pledged to stop offering sugary beverages with their kids’ meals. Of the top 200 restaurants that offer child-sized beverages, more than half of outlets (58%) do not offer sugary drinks (Figure 2).²²

Figure 1. Top 200 Restaurant Outlets with Sugary Drinks on the Children’s Menu



Policy Options for Healthy Defaults

Restaurants should support parents' efforts to feed their children healthfully by offering healthier side items and beverages as the default option with children's meals.

As of December 2021, four states (California, Hawaii, Delaware, and Illinois) and more than 20 localities have passed kids' meal policies.²³ Many more states and localities are working their way through the legislative process. The policies generally require that restaurants offer only healthier beverages as the defaults that come with children's meals.²⁴ San Francisco and Santa Clara County's policies set nutrition standards for restaurant children's meals that are sold with toys.²⁵

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For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

¹ Fryar CD, et al. *Fast Food Intake Among Children and Adolescents in the United States, 2015–2018*. NCHS Data Brief No. 375. 2020. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db375.htm>. Accessed February 8, 2022.

² Fryar, 2020.

³ Powell LM, Nguyen BT. Fast-Food and Full-Service Restaurant Consumption Among Children and Adolescents: Impact on Energy, Beverage, and Nutrient Intake. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2013;167(1):14-20.

⁴ Clark JW, Young JA. *Automatic enrollment: The power of the default*. Vanguard Research. 2021. Available <https://institutional.vanguard.com/VGApp/iip/site/institutional/researchcommentary/article/InvComPowerAutoEnrollment>. Accessed February 14, 2022.

⁵ Shepherd L, O'Carroll RE, Ferguson E. An International Comparison of Deceased and Living Organ Donation/Transplant Rates in Opt-in and Opt-out Systems: A Panel Study. *BMC Med.* 2014;12(131).

⁶ Peters J, et al. Using Healthy Defaults in Walt Disney World Restaurants to Improve Nutritional Choices. *J Assoc Consum Res.* 2016;1(1):92-103.

⁷ Wansink B, Hanks AS. Calorie Reductions and Within-Meal Calorie Compensation in Children's Meal Combos. *Obesity (Silver Spring).* 2014;22:630-632.

⁸ Anzman-Frasca S, et al. Orders of Healthier Children's Items Remain High More than Two Years after Menu Changes at a Regional Restaurant Chain. *Health Aff (Millwood).* 2015;34(11):1885-1892.

⁹ Halpern SD, Ubel PA, Asch DA. Harnessing the Power of Default Options to Improve Health Care. *N Engl J Med.* 2007;357:1340-1344.

¹⁰ Peters, 2016.

¹¹ Peters, 2016.

¹² Wansink, 2014.

¹³ Anzman-Frasca, 2015.

¹⁴ Wescott RF, Fitzpatrick B, Phillips E. *2014 Progress Report: McDonald's-Alliance for a Healthier Generation Partnership: Clinton Global Initiative Commitment to Action*. Keybridge Public Policy Economics. 2015. Available <https://www.healthiergeneration.org/our-work/businesses/impact/mcdonalds-commitments>. Accessed February 11, 2022.

¹⁵ Alliance for a Healthier Generation. *McDonald's Commitments*. n.d. Available <https://www.healthiergeneration.org/our-work/businesses/impact/mcdonalds-commitments>. Accessed February 14, 2022.

¹⁶ Anzman-Frasca S, et al. Healthier Side Dishes at Restaurants: An Analysis of Children's Perspectives, Menu Content, and Energy Impacts. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act.* 2014;11(81).

¹⁷ Marx K, Ribakove S. *Selling Out Kids' Health: 10 Years of Failure from Restaurants on Kids' Meals*. Center for Science in the Public Interest. 2021. Available <https://cspinet.org/resource/selling-out-kids-health>.

¹⁸ Marx, 2021.

¹⁹ Anzman-Frasca, 2014.

²⁰ Ribakove S, Wootan MG, Center for Science in the Public Interest. *Soda Still on the Menu: Progress, but More to Do to Get Soda off Restaurant Children's Menus*. 2019. Available <https://cspinet.org/KidsMealSoda2019>. Accessed February 8, 2022.

²¹ Ribakove, 2019.

²² Ribakove, 2019.

²³ Center for Science in the Public Interest. *Chart: State and Local Restaurant Kids' Meal Policies, 2021*. 2021. Available <https://cspinet.org/resource/chart-state-and-local-restaurant-kids-meal-policies>. Accessed February 8, 2022.

²⁴ Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2021.

²⁵ Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2021.