

Restaurant Children's Meals

Research shows that there is limited availability of healthy children's meals at restaurants.¹

- Tufts University researchers assessed the children's meal combinations available in the 10 largest quick-service and 10 largest full-service chain restaurants by sales in 2014.² They found that less than one third of these meal combinations at quick-service and one quarter at full-service restaurants met expert recommendations for calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium.³
- Researchers at the University of North Carolina and the Center for Science in the Public Interest, in 2012, found that only 3 percent of children's meal combinations met expert nutrition recommendations at the top-50 restaurant chains that offered children's menus with enough nutrition information for analysis.⁴
- A third study, out of Harvard University, assessed meal components rather than full meals at 45 chain restaurants (26 national and 19 regional) from 2012 to 2015.⁵ Researchers found that a meal containing an average beverage, entrée, side dish, and dessert contained about 1,000 calories which is 400 calories above the recommended limit. Similarly, the entrées alone provided about 790 mg sodium. The RAND Performance Standards recommend no more than 600 calories and 770 mg of sodium per children's meal.⁶

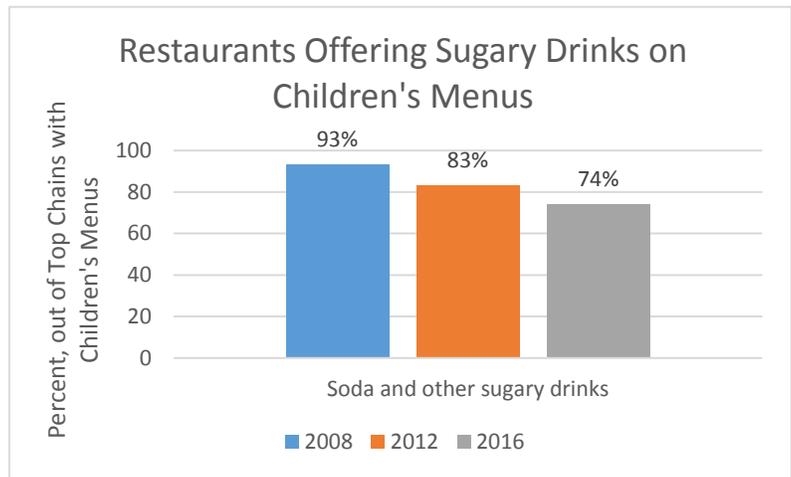
Voluntary industry efforts have resulted in some improvements—but they are insufficient.

The National Restaurant Association administers the **Kids LiveWell** program, which is designed to encourage healthy options on restaurant children's menus.⁷ More than 100 restaurant chains participate. The program's nutrition criteria are similar to expert recommendations, but participating restaurants are required only to offer **one meal combination** and **one side dish** that meet the standards.

Those voluntary efforts have driven only modest change. A report from the University of North Carolina and the Center for Science in the Public Interest quantified the number of meals at top restaurant chains meeting nutrition standards rose from 1 percent to 3 percent from 2008 to 2012.⁸ Harvard researchers found little change, noting that while restaurants participating in Kids LiveWell reduced entrée calories between 2012 and 2014,⁹ overall there was no significant decline in the calories, sodium, or saturated fat in children's entrées, sides, or desserts from 2012 to 2015.¹⁰

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The Center for Science in the Public Interest reported that several top chain restaurants, including McDonald's, Burger King, and Applebee's, have agreed to **stop listing soda and other sugary beverages on their children's menus**.¹¹ Fewer top chain restaurants had sugary beverages—soda, lemonade, and sugar sweetened juice drinks, like fruit punch—on their children's menus in 2016 than in 2012 or 2008, but the majority (74%) of top chains still did.¹²



Some restaurants are doing better than their competitors.

While there is limited availability of healthy restaurant children's meals, the experience of some restaurants shows that healthy children's meals are possible. Tufts researchers, for example, found that across the 10 largest quick-service and 10 largest full-service chain restaurants:

- All children's meal combinations in three of the 20 restaurant chains met the calorie standard.¹³
- One quick-service chain met all the nutrition standards for all its meal combinations.¹⁴
- More than half of the meal combinations at one full-service chain met the nutrition standards.¹⁵

Additionally, McDonald's and Walt Disney theme parks have changed the default beverages and sides that come with their children's meals. 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.¹⁶ Disney's healthy defaults resulted in 21 percent fewer calories compared to meals with french fries and a regular soft drink as the default side and beverage.¹⁷

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, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org and join the Voices of Healthy Kids Healthier Kids' Meal Action Team: <http://voicesforhealthykids.org/kids-meals/>.

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- ¹ Experts recommend that restaurant children’s meal combinations include a fruit or vegetable and meet specific nutrition standards, including that they contain no more than 600 calories, 35 percent of calories from fat, 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, and 770 mg of sodium. Cohen D, Bhatia R, Story MT, *et al.* (2013). *Performance Standards for Restaurants: A New Approach to Addressing the Obesity Epidemic*. Available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF300/CF313/RAND_CF313.pdf.
- ² Sliwa S, Anzman-Frasca S, Lynskey V, Washburn K, Economos C. “Assessing the Availability of Healthier Children’s Meals at Leading Quick-Service and Full-Service Restaurants.” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 2016, vol. 38, pp. 242-249.
- ³ *Id.* Note that results are reported by segment: 31.9 percent of 1,363 combinations at quick-service restaurants and 21.7 percent of 6,654 combinations at full-service restaurants met the nutrition standards.
- ⁴ Batada A, Wootan MG. *Kids’ Meals II: Obesity and Poor Nutrition on the Menu*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Science in the Public Interest, March 2013. Available at <https://cspinet.org/new/pdf/cspi-kids-meals-2013.pdf>. Note that researchers used nutrition standards with a lower calorie recommendation (430 calories).
- ⁵ Moran AJ, Block JP, Goshev SG, Bleich SN, Roberto CA. “Trends in Nutrient Content of Children’s Menu Items in U.S. Chain Restaurants.” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 2017, vol. 52, pp. 284-291.
- ⁶ Cohen, *supra* note 1.
- ⁷ National Restaurant Association. *Kids LiveWell Program*. Available at <http://www.restaurant.org/Industry-Impact/Food-Healthy-Living/Kids-LiveWell-Program>.
- ⁸ Batada, *supra* note 4.
- ⁹ Moran, *supra* note 5. Note that researchers did not find a statistically significant decrease from 2012 to 2015.
- ¹⁰ Moran, *supra* note 5.
- ¹¹ Center for Science in the Public Interest and Voices for Healthy Kids’ Action Center. *Six Down, Many to Go*. Available at http://www.foodmarketing.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/six_down_many_to_go_print_version.pdf.
- ¹² Ribakove S, Almy J, Wootan MG. *Soda on the Menu: Improvements Seen but More Change Needed for Beverages on Restaurant Children’s Menus*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Science in the Public Interest, July 2017.
- ¹³ Sliwa, *supra* note 2.
- ¹⁴ Sliwa, *supra* note 2.
- ¹⁵ Sliwa, *supra* note 2.
- ¹⁶ McDonald’s, Alliance for a Healthier Generation. “McDonald’s and Alliance for a Healthier Generation Announce Progress on Commitment to Promote Balanced Food and Beverage Choices,” June 25, 2015. Available at <http://news.mcdonalds.com/press-releases/mcdonald-s-and-alliance-for-a-healthier-generation-announce-progress-on-commitme-nyse-mcd-1203234>.
- ¹⁷ Peters J, Beck J, Lande J, Pan Z, Cardel M, Ayoob K, Hill J. “Using Healthy Defaults in Walt Disney World Restaurants to Improve Nutrition.” *The Behavioral Science of Eating* 2016, vol. 1, pp. 92-103.