

## Are Fast-Food Restaurants Keeping Their Promises to Offer Healthier Kids' Meals?

August 2017

To address public health concerns about the negative impact of children's fast food consumption, some of the largest U.S. fast-food restaurants have pledged to offer healthier kids' meal options. This study examined whether restaurants have implemented their pledges and how they promote healthier kids' meal choices at individual restaurants.

### The research

In 2016, Rudd Center researchers examined six restaurants—McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Subway, Dairy Queen, and KFC—that have pledged to remove sugary soda and other soft drinks from menu boards and/or offer healthier drinks and sides with kids' meals since 2013. Researchers evaluated implementation of restaurant pledges by analyzing: 1) drink and side items listed on kids' meal menus on chain restaurants' websites; 2) kids' meal drink and side items listed and pictured on menu boards and featured on signs at a sample of individual restaurants at each chain; and 3) drinks and sides offered by restaurant personnel at the point-of-sale with kids' meal orders. Results were compared to data collected in 2010 and 2013 to assess changes over time.

### Key findings

#### **Kids' meal menus posted on restaurant chains' websites in 2016 consistently reflected their healthier kids' meal pledges.**

- None of the restaurants examined listed sugary soda or other soft drinks, a notable improvement compared to 2013 when all restaurants except Subway listed them.
- All drink options listed on kids' meal menus online were healthier choices for children, including low-fat milk, 100% juice, and/or water.
- All restaurants listed at least one healthier side (e.g., applesauce or apple slices) with their kids' meals.
  - As promised, Subway exclusively listed healthier sides, and McDonald's added new healthier side options to its kids' meal menu.

#### **Individual restaurants at all chains consistently listed healthier drink options on kids' meal menu boards inside the restaurants in 2016. However, not all restaurants removed sugary soda and other soft drink options from kids' meal menu boards.**

- Approximately one-third or more of McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and Subway restaurant locations examined listed soft drinks as a kids' meal option on their menu boards, despite their pledges to remove them.
- In addition, some individual restaurant personnel at all chains automatically provided a cup for a soft drink when customers placed kids' meal orders, without offering any of the restaurants' healthier kids' meal drink options – ranging from 14% to 18% of orders at Subway, McDonald's, and Burger King, to 26% of Wendy's orders, and 44% and 50% of KFC and Dairy Queen orders.

Restaurants listed healthier drinks on their kids' meal online menus as promised, but not all restaurants removed sugary soda and other soft drinks from kids' meal menu boards inside restaurants.

**The majority of restaurants visited listed at least one healthier side option on kids' meal menu boards, but restaurant chains varied widely in how often personnel offered healthier sides with kids' meal orders.**

- Restaurant personnel at McDonald's, Subway, and KFC restaurants visited offered at least one healthier side option with 80% to 94% of orders, compared with 44% of orders at Dairy Queen, 22% at Wendy's, and just 8% of orders at Burger King.
- However, the majority of kids' meal orders placed at McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King restaurants visited – 68%, 76% and 90% of orders, respectively – were automatically given french fries.
- Furthermore, 85% of Burger King locations listed french fries as a kids' meal option on menu boards, and 43% of Subway restaurants visited listed cookies and/or baked chips, although the restaurants did not list these options on their kids' meal menus online.

**Restaurants with publically available healthier kids' meal policy statements were more likely to offer healthier drinks and sides with kids' meal orders.**

- Of the restaurants examined, Subway and McDonald's were the only to publish official healthier kids' meal policy statements. These restaurants offered healthier drinks and sides with kids' meal orders more consistently compared with the other restaurants examined.

Voluntary healthier kids' meal pledges by fast-food restaurants have increased the number of healthier options available, but inconsistent implementation at restaurants suggest much room for improvement.



## Recommendations

Kids' meal menus posted on restaurant websites consistently reflected their healthier kids' meal pledges, but public health advocates should insist that fast-food restaurants do more to further encourage purchases of healthier kids' meal options at restaurants, including:

- Require all restaurant chains to provide written statements detailing their healthier kids' meal promises and make them available to the public;
- Encourage restaurants to offer healthier options automatically, not just as a choice among both healthy and unhealthy options; and
- Monitor restaurants to ensure that they consistently implement their healthier kids' meal pledges at individual locations.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. For more information, visit [www.uconnruddcenter.org/healthierkidsmeals](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/healthierkidsmeals).

Support for this study was provided by Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.