

Parents' report of fast-food purchases for their children: Have they improved?

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Summary

Improving the nutritional quality of fast food consumed by children is an important public health objective. Since 2013, the largest fast-food restaurants have introduced policies to offer healthier drinks and/or sides with their kids' meals. This research examined the menu items that parents purchase for their children at fast-food restaurants, how purchases have changed over time, and parents' attitudes about healthier kids' meal offerings.

The research

To document parents' reported fast-food purchases for their children (ages 2-11), Rudd Center researchers conducted online surveys with a total of 2,468 parents in 2010, 2013, and 2016. Parents provided detailed information about lunch or dinner purchases for their child in the past week at one of the four largest fast-food restaurants (McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, or Subway) including specific menu items purchased. In 2016 only, parents reported their attitudes about restaurants' healthier kids' meal policies. Researchers examined differences between parents of preschool-age children (ages 2-5) and older children (ages 6-11) and changes over time.

Key findings

Parents' purchases of fast food for their children have increased in recent years.

- In 2016, 91% parents reported purchasing lunch or dinner for their child in the past week at one of the four largest fast-food restaurants, on average twice per week.
- In contrast, 79% reported purchasing fast food for their child in the past week in 2010.

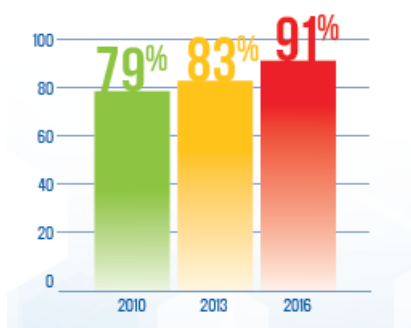
Approximately two-thirds of parents purchased a kids' meal for their child, but many purchased a kids' meal plus additional menu items.

- Across the three years, 64% of parents with a preschool-age child and 46% with an older child purchased *only* a kids' meal for their child.
- From 2010 to 2016, there was a significant increase in parents purchasing a kids' meal plus another item, such as a dessert or value menu item, for their child (5% in 2010 vs. 19% in 2016).

The proportion of kids' meal purchases with healthier drinks and sides has not increased.

- In 2016, 6 out of 10 parents who purchased a kids' meal received a healthier drink (e.g., low-fat plain milk, 100% juice), showing no change from 2010 to 2016.

Parents purchasing fast food for their child has increased in recent years.



3 out of 4 parents reported they would visit a restaurant more often because of its healthier kids' meal policy.



- Parents were more likely to purchase a healthier kids' meal drink for their preschool-age child (66%) than for an older child (50%), on average across the three years.
- One-half of parents who purchased a kids' meal received a healthier kids' meal side (e.g., yogurt, apple slices) in 2016. However, 61% received an unhealthy side (e.g., French fries, chips) as some restaurants now offer two sides with their kids' meals.
- Just 25% of kids' meals purchased received only healthier sides and drinks.

Parents respond positively to healthier fast-food kids' meal policies.

- In 2016, nearly all parents indicated that they will purchase fast food for their child more often because of the restaurant's healthier kids' meal policy.
- Yet the majority of kids' meal main dishes remain high in fat, sodium, and calories, and some fast-food restaurants provide desserts with their kids' meals.

Recommendations

Future research is required to understand the reasons for these trends, but it appears that [restaurants' current voluntary healthier kids' meal policies](#) are unlikely to reduce children's fast-food consumption overall or substantially increase purchases of healthier items.

These findings demonstrate opportunities for restaurants, advocates, and state and local policy makers to increase efforts to improve the nutritional quality of fast food consumed by children.

Restaurants:

- Make healthier items the most appealing options for children and the easiest options for parents to order, for example, by automatically providing healthier options with kids' meals.
- Discontinue the increasingly common practice of offering unhealthy sides together with healthier sides — or remove unhealthy sides from kids' meal menus altogether — as restaurants have pledged to do with kids' meal drinks.
- Introduce healthier kids' meal main dishes and meals with wider appeal for older children.

Advocates and state and local policy makers:

- Continue to encourage fast-food restaurants to improve the nutrition of kids' meal side and main dish items in addition to drinks. Urge them to introduce healthier options as the default, not just another choice among both healthy and unhealthy options.
- Follow the lead of communities in California, Colorado, Kentucky, and Maryland and consider legislation or regulation to require that all restaurants automatically provide healthy drinks and/or sides with kids' meals.¹
- Monitor and insist that restaurants consistently implement their healthier kids' meal policies.

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.

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¹ These findings also demonstrate that such policies must be carefully crafted to limit possible unintended responses from consumers that could reduce their effectiveness, such as an increase in parents purchasing a kids' meal plus another menu item or purchasing higher calorie menu items in place of kids' meals for their child.