Restaurant Children's Meals: The Faults with Defaults

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

Research shows that people generally stick with default options. 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 supports parents by reducing barriers to feeding their children healthfully.

The Power of Defaults

Studies on organ donation, health care, and retirement savings show that people often stick with the default option. They also show high acceptability of beneficial defaults.

- Auto-enrollment in 401(k) plans increases employee retirement savings enrollment from 75% when employees have to actively enroll in a savings plan to 85-95% with default auto-enrollment plans.
- After controlling for other factors thought to affect donation rates, countries with organ donation as the default policy have 25-30% higher rates of organ donation than countries without default policies.
- In an Internet survey, twice as many people (96%) agreed to participate in future surveys if the question was asked with the default as opting-in to future surveys as compared to when opting-out was the default (48%).

"Purposefully setting default options is no more paternalistic than taking a laissez-faire approach... setting default options explicitly aims to maximize welfare, ignoring default options leaves welfare to chance."

-New England Journal of Medicine, 2007

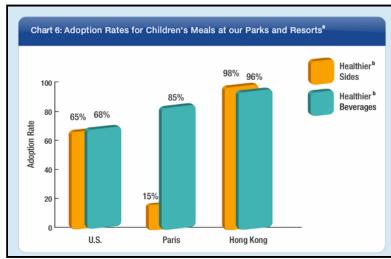
Healthy Default Options Support Healthy Eating

Making the standard default options healthy would facilitate healthy eating at restaurants.

In a study at Subway, people who received a default menu highlighting lower-calorie sandwiches were 48% likelier to choose a lower-calorie sandwich than those given a mixed menu that highlighted both low- and high-calorie

sandwich options.

At Disney theme parks (figure at right), fruits and vegetables are the default side dishes and low-fat milk and juice are the default beverages with children's meals. The healthier options have been well-received, with two-thirds of parents sticking with the healthier meal options for their children.



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

- A study of the nation's top 25 chain restaurants found that 93% of children's meal combinations
 are too high in calories, 45% are too high in saturated fat, and 86% are too high in sodium.
- In a national study of the default options offered with McDonald's Happy Meals, the choice of side dish was assumed by the restaurant 93% of the time, and it was always French fries. Beverage choices were usually offered, but soda was the first option offered 78% of the time.
 - A McDonald's Happy Meal with a healthier side dish and beverage (hamburger, apple dippers with caramel sauce, and apple juice) has 50% less fat, one-third less saturated fat, and 25% fewer calories than the default Happy Meal (hamburger, French fries and a soda).

Some chain restaurants are offering and advertising children's meals with apple slices, applesauce, low-fat milk, and 100% juice. Restaurants could support healthy eating further by offering those healthier side items and beverages as the *default* option with children's meals.



Children's Meal: Redesigned

On the left, a default McDonald's Happy Meal, and on the right, a healthier version.

Obesity Prevention and Child Nutrition Are a National Priority

- One in three children in the United States is overweight or obese.
- Obese children and teenagers are more likely to become obese adults. Obesity increases the risk of developing heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes.
- Being overweight in childhood is associated with low self-esteem, depression, stigma, teasing and bullying, and discrimination.
- American adults and children consume on average one third of their calories from eating out.
- Studies link eating out with obesity and higher caloric intakes. Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant compared to a meal at home.

For more information contact Margo G. Wootan, Center for Science in the Public Interest, 202-777-8352, nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org.