

Food Marketing: Using Toys to Market Children's Meals

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Introduction

Food marketing has been shown to influence children's food preferences, food choices, diets, and health.^{1,2} Nearly \$2 billion is spent yearly by U.S. food and beverage companies to market products to children, with the majority of expenditures promoting less healthful foods and drinks.³⁻⁶ Policymakers, health authorities, and advocates are working on a number of initiatives to reshape unhealthy food marketing practices to reduce and prevent childhood overweight and obesity.

For restaurants, including toys with children's meals is the leading form of food marketing directed at children by expenditure.⁶ In 2009, the top fast-food restaurant chains spent the majority (59%) of their marketing dollars to acquire toys, games, puzzles, or other premiums (see definition) to distribute with children's meals.⁶ The toys are often given away for free or at a minimal cost with the purchase of a meal.



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The practice of child-directed marketing by pairing toys with children's meals is of particular concern for several reasons:⁷⁻¹⁰

- Restaurant foods are an increasing proportion of children's diets in the United States.^{9,11-13}
- The vast majority of restaurant children's meals do not meet nutrition standards.¹⁰
- Restaurant toys or premiums are often tied to movie and cartoon characters and celebrities.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ This practice has been shown to affect children's food choices and preferences.¹⁴⁻¹⁷
- Industry self-regulations mostly do not address the practice and appear to be inadequate.

Therefore, the marketing practice of using toys to market children's meals has been targeted as a potential policy focus to improve the nutritional quality of restaurant children's meals and help parents in their efforts to purchase healthy options while eating out.

What is a Premium?

As defined by the Federal Trade Commission,⁶ premiums are "specialty or premium items other than food products that are distributed in connection with the sale of any of the company's food products, whether distributed by sale, by redemption of coupons, codes, or proofs of purchase, within food packages, in conjunction with restaurant meals, as prizes in contests or sweepstakes, or otherwise." Toys are one example of a premium.

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The Evidence

- **Food marketing to children via toys is pervasive.** The top fast-food restaurant chains reported to the Federal Trade Commission that in 2009 they spent \$341 million on toys to distribute with children's meals—an amount well over half the entire amount (\$583 million) that they reported spending on all marketing activities aimed at children that same year.⁶ In 2009, these restaurants sold slightly more than 1 billion meals with toys to children ages 12 and under, accounting for 18 percent of all child restaurant visits.⁶
- **Eating out is a growing and problematic part of children's diets.** Children consume, on average, 25 percent of their daily calories at fast-food and other restaurants.⁹ Consumption of restaurant foods has been linked with increased caloric intake, poor nutrition, and higher risk for overweight/obesity, and has been shown to influence the future food preferences and eating habits of children.¹¹⁻¹³
- **Children's restaurant meals—many of which use toys as a marketing technique—are of poor nutritional quality.** While children's meals with toys have included fewer fries and more milk, fruit, and fruit juice, improvements have been modest.^{6,10} In 2008, only 1 percent of restaurant children's meals met nutrition standards.¹⁸ By 2012, that number increased to only 3 percent.¹⁰ And more than half (56%) of the top restaurant chains do not have a single children's meal meeting nutrition standards.¹⁰
- **Associating toys with healthy foods can affect children's food liking and preference, as can coupling children's meals with brands, popular movies, TV programs, and/or cartoon characters.** Evidence from simulation studies suggests that pairing healthy meals with toys increases preschool children's liking and anticipated taste of that meal.¹⁹ Similarly, associating food with branded characters, popular cartoon characters, and celebrity endorsements are effective at enhancing a child's perceived food taste and preferences.^{14-17,20}
- **Children are likely to choose healthy meals when offered in conjunction with toys.** Children are more likely to choose a healthy meal over a less healthful meal when only healthy meals are paired with a toy.^{19,21} This effect may be stronger in boys than girls.²¹
- **Parents do not support the use of toys to market fast food to their children.** Parents report they are not comfortable with the use of toys to promote fast food unless they are used to promote healthier foods.¹⁹ In addition, a majority of parents (59%) report they would be more likely to buy children's meals if they met nutrition guidelines.²²
- **Fast-food advertisements to children feature toys more often than foods.** National televised fast-food advertisements geared toward children emphasize toys, movie tie-ins, and other premiums, both visually and in audio scripts, more often than the food products themselves. Almost 70 percent of televised and child-targeted fast-food ads, monitored over one year, included toys or other giveaways.²³ This is not in alignment with industry self-regulation guidelines in which companies pledged to make food, rather than toys, the primary focus of ads directed to children.^{23,24}
- **Industry self-regulations often do not address toys and other premiums.** The Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) does not address "children's meals" or child-targeted marketing through toys or other premiums.²⁵ The National Restaurant Association Kids LiveWell program does not include toys or other premiums as a part of its child-directed marketing policies.²⁶ However, companies that sign on to follow the Children's Advertising Review Unit self-regulation guidelines pledge to make food, rather than toys, the primary focus of ads directed to children.²⁴
- **Policies can guide restaurants to improve their marketing practices using toys.** In 2010, two California counties passed separate ordinances requiring that restaurant chains only be allowed to use toys or other premiums to promote children's meals that meet well-accepted nutrition standards. Preliminary evidence suggests that, in one county, restaurants affected by the ordinance improved their toy distribution and marketing practices to promote more healthful meals, compared with restaurants unaffected by the ordinance.^{27,28} In the other county, a study of two global fast food chains showed that they offered toys for an additional 10 cents with the purchase of a children's meal.²⁹ While one of the two chains made some improvements in its children's menus, neither changed their menus to meet ordinance criteria.²⁹ The restaurants in the second county were able to comply in this way because of ordinance language which prohibited only the giving away of *free* toys or other incentives with foods, beverages, and meals not meeting nutritional criteria.²⁹ This language allowed toys to be sold separately.²⁹
- **Restaurants have also changed some of their practices on their own.** In July 2011, one global chain, McDonald's, announced that it would improve the nutritional quality of Happy Meals by reducing the portion size of French fries, which had long been the default side dish, and adding a side of apple slices to all Happy Meals.³⁰ This decreased the calorie content of the typical Happy Meal by 110 calories. In addition, it announced that fat-free chocolate milk would be a beverage option.³⁰ In June 2011, Jack in the Box announced it would no longer offer or market toys with its children's meals.³¹ Recently, McDonald's also agreed not to market sodas to children via in-store or external advertising or list them on the children's menu.³² Taco Bell also announced in July 2013 that it would eliminate children's meals and toys/premiums from its menu over the next year.³³

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Conclusions

Over half of all fast-food restaurant expenditures for marketing to children are spent on toys or premiums to distribute with children's meals.⁶ While some restaurants have made recent improvements to their children's meals and even removed toys altogether, others—especially those that serve millions of children every year—have done little.

Encouragingly, studies show that the use of toys with children's meals can be harnessed to cultivate positive behaviors in children, and parents are in support of using toys to promote healthier choices. One promising policy strategy that has the potential to promote healthier choices appears to be regulations that require the use of toys only with meals that meet certain nutrition criteria. Early evidence indicates that such policies can encourage restaurants to make healthy changes to their overall food and marketing environments.

Policy Implications

- Restaurant companies should pledge only to use toys and other premiums with healthy children's meals that meet well-accepted and evidence-based nutrition criteria.
- The CFBAI should include the use of toys and other premiums among the types of marketing practices companies must address through their self-regulatory pledges.
- The National Restaurant Association Kids LiveWell program should guide participating restaurants to use toys and other premiums only with healthy children's meals.
- Municipalities and states should consider developing and evaluating policies aimed at improving the nutritional content of restaurant children's meals, including those distributed with toys and other premiums.
- Restaurants should continue to improve the nutritional content of children's meals, so that *all* meals meet calorie, sodium, fat, and other nutrition standards. They should remove sugary drinks from children's menus and offer healthy beverages, such as water.
- Restaurants should also provide calorie information for all menu items on menu boards so that parents and children can make informed and healthy choices.
- Stakeholders should conduct public awareness and education campaigns on the importance of healthful children's meals.

Suggested Citation

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