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Vermont Healthy Kids’ Meals: Parents’ Perspectives

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Introduction

* Childhood obesity has been increasing for decades and can be attributed to excess caloric intake driven by large portions, restaurant foods, and availability of food.
* The options on children’s menus in restaurants typically involve unhealthy choices such as fries, chicken fingers, and grilled cheese, with soda as the primary drink option.
* Though initially skeptical of modifications, restaurants will enact changes to maintain customer satisfaction and profits.
* There is often no significant difference in price of healthier children’s meals.

Methods

187 paper and electronic surveys were administered throughout the state of Vermont.
13 multiple choice or yes/no questions explored attitudes towards the availability, cost, and importance of healthy kids’ meals.
3 demographic questions assessed income, highest level of education, and number of children in the household.
5 optional open-ended questions sought parent suggestions and opinions not addressed by the previous questions.

Results

- Concern about sugary drinks in kids’ meals: 41% of parents reported feeling concerned or highly concerned about the inclusion of sugary drinks in kids’ meals.
- Overall, 62% of parents were very likely to choose the healthier food option at a restaurant.
- Single most important nutritional factor sought by parents: "Healthy, balanced, nutritious meals for their children while dining out."
- Lessons learned:
  - The majority of parents are concerned about kids’ meal nutrition and would like to purchase healthier options over current options, even at increased prices.
  - For lower income Vermonters, cost does remain a concern. If restaurants enact changes to the kids’ menu, prices should remain the same, if not lower, to ensure that families of all socioeconomic classes will be likely to purchase healthier meals.
  - Priority modifications to meals should remain the same, if not lower, to ensure that families of all socioeconomic classes will be likely to purchase healthier meals.
  - The majority of parents are concerned about kids’ meal nutrition and would like to purchase healthier options over current options, even at increased prices.

What Parents are Saying

- What don’t you want to see in kids’ meals?
  * “Added sugar, sodium, high fructose corn syrup, added chemicals.”
  * “Soda, fried food, coloured food, sugar.”
  * “GMOs, preservatives, fructose syrup, pesticides, sugar.”
- What do you want to see in kids’ meals?
  * “Veggies, fruits, milk, a mini size of normal adult foods like fish, meat, etc.”
  * “Fresh fruits and veggies, and a nice range of options.”

Discussion

- The majority of parents are concerned about kids’ meal nutrition and would like to purchase healthier options over current options, even at increased prices.
- For lower income Vermonters, cost does remain a concern. If restaurants enact changes to the kids’ menu, prices should remain the same, if not lower, to ensure that families of all socioeconomic classes will be likely to purchase healthier meals.
- Priority modifications to meals should remain the same, if not lower, to ensure that families of all socioeconomic classes will be likely to purchase healthier meals.

Lessons learned:
- Parents have differing opinions on what a “healthy” meal constitutes.
- Physicians need to consider access to healthy food as a potential source of stress and poor health outcomes in patients.