



Changing the menu

Why should our intentions to feed our children healthy, nutritious food be overturned when eating out? **Diane Schmidt**, president and founder of Healthy Fare for Kids, challenges us to help create change

It's time for the foodservice industry to offer healthier food for their child customers. The opportunity is now, the ability is within your reach and families and our nation needs you. One in every five children in the US aged between 12 and 19 is obese, not just overweight. That is triple the rate of 30 years ago. More than one-third of children in the US, Canada, Mexico and Brazil are overweight. Most of these children will grow up carrying around not only excess weight, but also

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THAN AT HOME

A hotdog contains **28%** of an adult's recommended daily intake of salt and **26%** of saturated fat

the risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, cancer, Type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis and more. And most of it is preventable.

The alarm call has been sounding for a decade, yet almost all restaurants still serve food of poor nutritional quality to children.

Most parents want to raise a healthy child. But how do they balance feeding their kids healthily while constantly saying “no” to very appealing yet unhealthy foods on television, the internet, in grocery and convenience stores and to my chagrin, in clothing stores.

But the problem is most apparent when eating out. It used to be that eating out was a treat, an occasional event, but now with 50% of food dollars spent outside the home, restaurants have become a dominant source of food and influence for children.

While the onus lies with parents to order a healthier meal for their children, if there are only chocolate chip pancakes covered in whipped cream displayed on the kid’s breakfast menu, a well-balanced egg and multi-grain toast meal can’t compete.

If there are no healthy choices on the menu, how can families eat more healthily? And, as we go down the distribution channel, if foodservice distributors or food manufacturers don’t sell healthier items, how do restaurants provide healthier meals? Each link in this chain has the opportunity to help champion a solution. This is the moment that each member needs to step up and assert that influence.

Two years ago, I became fed up with a decade’s worth of kid’s menus. I wondered why is the worst food in the restaurant always on the kid’s menu? It didn’t matter if the restaurant was a family diner, an upscale bistro or a concession at a children’s museum. It always contained the same items that every parent can recite by heart: deep-fried chicken nuggets, mac and cheese, hot dogs, or hamburgers, all served with fries and a sugary beverage. My

frustration wasn't with the menu's redundancy, it's that its food offerings make our kids sick.

From frustration to action

Out of frustration comes creation and I decided to try to change what restaurants offer on kids' menus. I had the good fortune to meet Chef Sarah Stegner, a two-time James Beard award winner, and holistic nutrition consultant Carol Wagner. Together we created a set of nutritional guidelines to inspire chefs to easily create a well-balanced, tasty meal for their child customers, introducing children to food that tastes good and is good for them.

Our programme, Healthy Fare for Kids™, asks chefs to create at least one healthy and delicious meal for children on their menus according to our nutritional guidelines. And we ask that menus display a Healthy Fare for Kids™ logo next to the certified meal as well as a brief description of our programme or our website address.

What started as a neighbourhood initiative in December, 2011, with twelve restaurants, has grown to reach more than 20 million people. Accomplished chefs such as Paul Virant, Bruce Sherman, Sarah Stegner, Rick Bayless, Helen Cameron and others, along with local family diners and small sandwich shops, have stepped up to create a Healthy Fare for Kids™ option in their restaurants.

Recently Healthy Fare for Kids™, was introduced at Midway International Airport, the first airport in the nation to offer a healthy eating initiative for children. Premier Restaurant Group, owner and operator of most of the Midway concessions, pledged to become a healthier airport and asked Healthy Fare for Kids™ to help it reach its goals.

And last March, Healthy Fare for Kids™ launched a partnership with Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, where more than 750,000 kids visit each year. The perfect target group for such a programme. The partnership includes Sodexo, the >

the Healthy Fare for Kids-logo

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A single serving of syrup-sweetened soda can contain as many as **137** calories

Healthy Fare for Kids™ recommends lean cuts of meat and legumes, which are both good sources of protein



Diane Schmidt

Shedd's foodservice provider, which executed the programme brilliantly and garnered endorsements from Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and George Chavel, president and CEO of Sodexo North America. Both programmes have brought a great deal of positive publicity to Midway Airport and Shedd Aquarium for being a leader in innovative healthy meals for their child customers.

As we continue to expand our reach, the Healthy Fare for Kids™ logo gets in front of more families, which creates an opportunity for a discussion about healthy food. And discussions are the first step in changing behaviour.

The central guideline to Healthy Fare for Kids™ is to pair a protein with a serving of fruit or vegetables. If the protein is meat or poultry, it must be raised without the use of antibiotics. Children need good food that makes them healthy and with the overuse of antibiotics in industrialised farming, children are vulnerable to the effects of the escalating antibiotic-resistant infections.

Also, we ask for whole grains and local produce when available. We ask that food be prepared using little salt and sugar and by cooking methods using healthy oils and no deep-frying. Also, we want no sugary beverages and small desserts – if any. Finally, we ask for child-sized portions. Children and adults consume over 50% more calories when eating out than at home. Portions served to kids must shrink.

Adding one healthy item to a menu that meets our guidelines seems a small investment for a foodservice operator to make, but it's not without its challenges. Chefs may not know where to procure antibiotic-free meat or poultry, in which case we help connect them to local suppliers. Also, meat raised without the use of antibiotics costs more. But as the demand for this healthier meat increases, it's generating more supply and pricing competition, thereby reducing costs for

everyone in the not-so-long term.

Another challenge for some chefs, initially, is the un-bundling of fries and sugary beverages from the kids' meal. I've had several chefs concerned that families will be unhappy with kids meals served without fries or soda. The answer is keeping these items on the menu for parents to order, just not tied to the kids menu. Make the parents do the work in ordering the food that's not part of a well-balanced meal, but don't make it the default item from your menu.

Of course, new menu items can mean producing costly new menus, menu boards and making website changes. Using a simple call-out card on the kids' menu or creating a separate menu board introducing the healthier kids meal is the answer. The most important thing is making good food available.

Long-term gains

Chefs also face multiple challenges in getting healthier food from national foodservice suppliers. I find they turn more to local suppliers for antibiotic-free meat, local produce and key ingredients. National foodservice suppliers can work to improve the variety of healthier options while demanding healthier food from food manufacturers. They can also create kid-tested campaigns that offer menus, ingredients and marketing support for their customers to easily adopt a healthy kid's menu.

Which leads to the reason why a healthier menu programme for kids is such a smart business decision. By 2030, almost half of American adults are projected to be obese. This will cost the US almost \$500bn over the next two decades. Much of this money will cover direct costs of health care for overweight adults. A leaner society would allow this money to be spent

on strengthening our economy instead.

A healthy children's menu is a great a way to build or refresh a brand, bringing positive attention to a business and customers to the table. It not only adds value for your diners, it's a springboard for an untold number of cross-promotional programmes, further creating loyalty among your customer base and building associations with the Healthy Fare for Kids™ brand. Finally, such programmes tie

into your community's efforts to reduce childhood obesity.

My final point is a plea to extend some types of healthy children's meal to teenagers. This age

group has the highest rate of childhood obesity and is the springboard to becoming an adult obesity statistic. These are years of new independence, eating out with friends and becoming responsible for their own meals. Even though teens can empty a refrigerator in one sitting, it's important they have a healthy well-balanced and proportional serving of food to choose when dining out. Again, blast away the pairing of fries and sugary beverage. It will reinforce the notion of healthy eating behaviour, giving them a chance to beat the obesity odds.

I'm not suggesting the remedy for childhood obesity sits solely in the lap of the foodservice industry – there are many factors. But it's within the reach of our industry to support families in this fight to raise healthier kids. Much like the smoking cessation efforts 50 years ago, restaurants dedicating tables for non-smokers were at the forefront of change. It sends a message. Having a healthy eating programme for children sends a message too.

The objective of Healthy Fare for Kids™ is to help children make the connection between eating, how they feel and the health benefits of nutritious food. Join me now in reaching our goals. ■

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