

Childhood Obesity Still a Problem— Here's How To Fight It

By Jane Kolodinsky

Marketing to children is effective. Any parent who has paid attention to ads for toys this Christmas knows that. But marketing doesn't only work on toys; it also works on influencing eating behaviors that aren't healthy for our kids. Kids see three to five advertisements per day for fast food and 50 percent of ads directed at children are food-related.

The french fry is the most popular vegetable for toddlers. A typical kids' meal at a restaurant includes fries with chicken nuggets, or a burger and a soda. Kids want them because they taste good. But, they are loaded with saturated fat, sugar and sodium. We can do better.

With about half of the American food dollar spent on food away from the home, food served at restaurants is not a trivial part of kids' diets. Restaurant meals contain 1.4 times the amount of calories, and are higher in sodium and saturated fat compared to food cooked at home. We're seeing the impact on our kids.

Childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years. Nearly 30 percent of Vermont children are overweight or obese. Overweight children become overweight adults. Overweight teens have a 70 percent greater chance of becoming overweight or obese as adults and if that child has an overweight or obese parent, the chance increases to 80 percent.

So what can we do? Many food habits are developed in the first two years of life. Starting early, before children develop poor eating habits, makes sense. Ensuring that restaurant kids' meals meet nutrition standards is a good first step.

Why? Marketing certain foods to children by designating them as "kids' menu items" and by bundling

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them together as meals establishes food norms for children, which affects their preferences in other places they eat.

Improving the nutritional quality of restaurant kids' meals can help children develop a taste for healthy food while their eating patterns are developing and set them on a path for lifelong healthy eating behaviors.

It makes sound economic sense, too. A Tufts University study of the Silver Diner restaurant chain showed that healthy kids' meals are good for kids and good for business. Researchers looked at sales data before and after the restaurant chain introduced a healthier children's menu. After the menu changes, children's meal orders became more healthful and the restaurant's revenue outpaced that of other leading family dining chains.

The University of Vermont Medical Center has been a leader in offering healthy options in its restaurants for several years. A study of the impact of that decision showed a majority of patrons ate at the hospital because the food tastes good and more than a third ate there because it was healthy. And, UVMCMC doesn't serve only a captive audience. Fourteen percent of patrons said their reason for being at the cafeteria that day was to eat — not visiting a patient, not working at the hospital — they chose the hospital as their restaurant. The hospital is making the healthy choice the easy choice and making it tasty.

Healthy food sells. A recent survey of Vermont parents by UVM public health students found 95 percent of parents wanted healthy kids' meals at restaurants for their kids even if the meals cost more.

But they shouldn't cost more. The Silver Diner chain found their children's meals increased in cost by only 19 cents, a small price to pay for the trade-off of strawberries, mixed vegetables or salads that are now bundled with every kids' meal.

Can ensuring that kids' meals at restaurants in Vermont meet nutrition standards really impact obesity? You bet. The Institute of Medicine has identified increasing the availability of healthful food and beverage options for children in restaurants as a key strategy in obesity prevention.

I think it's worth a try here in Vermont. We don't have anything to lose but weight.

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Published in The Brattleboro Reformer, December 26, 2017 as "Commentary: Building a better kids' menu"

<http://www.reformer.com/stories/commentary-building-a-better-kids-menu,527961>

Published in The Herald of Randolph, December 28, 2017 as "Childhood Obesity Still a Problem—Here's How To Fight It"

<https://www.ourherald.com/articles/childhood-obesity-still-a-problem-heres-how-to-fight-it/>

Published in The Rutland Herald, December 29, 2017 as "Improving kids' eating patterns"

<http://www.rutlandherald.com/articles/improving-kids-eating-patterns/>