

Statement from Lynn Zanardi Blevins, MD, MPH and mother of two

### **Improving restaurant kids' meals helps parents too**

Although I am a trained physician and a practicing public health professional, I feel most compelled to speak from the perspective of a Williston mother of two children who have just aged out of kids' meals. This legislation comes about 10 years too late for my family. Thank you for allowing me to explain why.

Eating out can be a break from the usual routine, a chance to try new foods, or a way to celebrate, but it can also be stressful for parents trying to encourage their kids to adopt a healthy diet. Items on the children's menu are typically high in calories and lacking in fruits and vegetables. Macaroni and cheese, cheeseburger sliders, and hot dogs come to mind. That's just the main meal. These extras pack the punch:

**Drinks:** Like adults, children are drinking their calories. Fountain drinks, in particular, offer up empty calories before the eating has even started. Water, milk, and (to a lesser extent) 100% fruit juice are a better choices, but fountain drinks are featured prominently in the restaurant and on menus.

**Sides:** Typically, children are asked "Would you like fries with that?", which almost always elicits an answer of "yes", as other options aren't presented. This child likely thinks they will receive fries or nothing. Why aren't children asked: "What side would you like with that: applesauce, cole slaw, fruit slices, etc.?" Fries could still be an option, but they aren't the default. Children should be making an active choice with help from a parent, not adopting unhealthy restaurant defaults.

**Dessert:** Admittedly, this is often part of what makes going out to eat special. However, particularly when bundled as part of a whole meal, it sends the sugar and calorie content over the top given what else the child has just consumed. If the child has already consumed a sugar-sweetened beverage, they essentially have already had dessert, as the sugar content is similar.

Children's meals, typically offered to kids up to age 10, send a strong cultural message to children as they are establishing their dietary habits. While the meals may appeal to children, they create challenges for parents who are trying to instill good eating habits. As children transition to the adult menu, they are more receptive to cultural and peer influences than they are messages from their parents. When it comes to eating out, parents can end up feeling that their own dietary intentions for their kids have been hijacked.

Let's imagine what we do want for our kids. Our children are the first generation that may, on average, [live shorter lives](#) than their parents due to obesity and associated chronic diseases like diabetes.

Disproving these predictions requires action and messaging about healthy lifestyles from multiple avenues: family, education, government, and business. Restaurants have a unique opportunity to lead the way by replacing unhealthy "default" items with healthier choices. This would support the intentions of most parents I know and help prime children for making a life's worth of healthy choices as adults.

Life expectancy reference: <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMSr043743>