

Managing kids' diets

An update on kids' menus

BY PAT DANDO



Kids will try just about anything if they see their peers or parents eating it.

The good news is that strides have been made to improve kids' diets, especially through school venues. The bad news is that the foods kids prefer aren't very healthy.

For the most part, schools have adjusted their menus, eliminating soda pop and fryers. According to Eric Peterson, spokesperson for the School Nutrition Association (SNA), schools are currently working with suppliers to reformulate pizza crusts and breadings to include whole grains.

But it will be difficult to translate the "good-for-you" benefits to kids and even parents. Even if that is successful, it will be a greater challenge to have anyone understand the differences between a breaded school lunch product and a quick service restaurant (qsr) product. How do you explain to kids, parents and teachers that the

chicken fingers at school are good to eat, but the same thing at a fast food restaurant is bad?

It is, indeed, a sad commentary that children's car seats are going to be made larger to accommodate the expanding girth of young children. It is frightening to review the latest figures on overweight children.

Fully one-third (25 million) of U.S. children and teens are either overweight or close to being overweight. A lot of that has to be related to the fact that their parents and/or role models are overweight, so heaviness is acceptable by a large portion of today's society.

Certainly, 99 percent of parents care about their kids and are concerned — at least to some degree — about their fitness and nutrition. However, between lack of knowledge and time constraints, it is difficult to be proactive. Parents are more likely to give kids a processed

(probably unhealthy) snack rather than prepare something fresh and good for them.

More parents are part of two-income households and that equates to more meals being sourced away-from-home for either in-home or restaurant consumption. Many experts claim that neither option is very good, especially if the focus is on children's health and nutrition.

A review of Mintel Group data from the fourth-quarter 2005 shows that restaurants do little to encourage healthy eating among kids. (See chart on page 24.)

It might be helpful for foodservice operators and parents to realize that the focus on nutrition and fitness is here to stay. In addition, there is growing attention, and mounting opposition on how restaurants serve children. With consumer "no" votes against unhealthful restaurant and carryout foods will be a corresponding decrease in consumer expenditures on "unacceptable" menu items.

A growing number of parents are beginning to focus on nutrition because they feel it affects their kids' health and well-being. Since there is a real lack of information and education on the subject, more people are seeking professional help. As with many food trends, this starts at the top of the socio-economic strata and works its way down.

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It's a matter of weight

Kids between 2 and 19 are putting on pounds at record numbers, with obesity reaching the high double-digits.

BOYS		GIRLS	
2000	2004	2000	2004
14%	18.2%	13.8%	16%

Source: National Health & Nutrition Examination Survey, 2006

Fortunately, a child doesn't have to be obese for a red flag to be raised. The challenge is finding help. Currently, it is not coming from the foodservice industry. Many claim that the industry is blocking progress in this area. More and more, the government and others are telling us what is wrong with our foods, but seldom does anyone tell us how to make it right.

There are a number of food and nutrition specialists — dietitians, chefs, physical fitness experts, etc. — who are finding that parents are seeking their consultation for themselves and their families. Some of the important things to keep in mind are:

- **Kids like stronger flavor profiles**
- **Kids eat with their eyes, ears and noses**
Sensory is very important
- **Kids will eat just about anything, once they try something and see parents/peers eating it**
If they don't eat it the first time, keep on trying
- **Most kids love sushi, wraps, kabobs, etc. — lots of finger foods**
- **Portion control is as important for kids as adults**
They tend to eat what is on their plates
Balance between portion size and value is critical
- **Independent/full-service operators tend to offer more flexibility**
Small plate sizes of regular menu items are growing in popularity, which frequently replaces kids menus and offers less costly experimentation
Side dishes of fruits, vegetables, grains, etc., provide variety
If you work with your server, you will both have a better experience
- **Parents and kids see value (and flavor) in organic/fresh foods and are willing to pay a premium**
- **Carryout can provide a positive family experience, especially with a fresh salad and veggies**

- **Kids have more sensitive palates than adults**
- **Genetics only plays a role in 2-3 percent of obesity cases, thus exercise/physical activity is necessary for all**

There appears to be an overwhelming consensus that foodservice is doing an inadequate job in serving the needs of kids and families.

Parents are confused and feel they lack the knowledge needed to make good choices to benefit their kids. The lack of support from the National Restaurant Association with regard to publication of nutritional data is frustrating. If not the nutritional information, they could at least supply an effective alternative.

Rather than ignoring reality, kids should be using their math skills to analyze their food choices. "If I have 'x' number of calories for a soft drink, I only have 'y' left for my sandwich."

A recently released study by The Hartmann Group, "Children's Wellness, 2006," reports that most parents believe they have "adequate" control over their children's health and wellness in the home environment (i.e., control of food, personal care products, home cleaning products, air and water filtration, etc.). However, outside of the home environment, parents feel out of control, worried and frustrated by the limited array of choices that are currently available to their children (e.g., in schools, restaurants, after-school or day care programs, etc.).

That is a significant finding that says that the foodservice industry is not on top of this very important trend. The battle for good nutrition

Top 10 child dishes q4 '05

MENU ITEM DISH	
Chicken Fingers	9.63%
Grilled Cheese Sandwich	7.28%
Burger	6.12%
Macaroni and Cheese	5.52%
Pizza	4.49%
Hot Dog	3.56%
Cheeseburger	2.92%
Corn Dog	2.84%
Spaghetti	2.12%
Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich	1.78%
Chicken Nuggets	1.57%
Quesadilla	1.47%

Source: R&I's Top 400 Chains, 2005

has been fought long and hard and it appears that they industry is losing ground. Take a look at your efforts and see where your company stands. Operators need to be proactive and manufacturers need to support their efforts. ■

The following is a brief list of resources compiled for this column. There are many, many more sources of good information — far too numerous to mention here. Feel free to contact the sources listed or contact me — patdando@aol.com. — for more information.

ASSOCIATIONS

American Dietetic Association
www.eatright.org

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