

Kids on the Menu

For restaurants, kids are big business. This means understanding their unique needs—their appetites, their food interests, their nutritional needs, their opinions—as well as the relationship they have with their parents at the dining table.

Kids' menus are an important part of communicating with children at the restaurant, and while fat claims and nutritional claims on the kids' menu are only a small share of all menu items, change may be in the wind. Fruits and vegetables have made some gains, and healthful kids' menu innovation abounds.

Movement toward more healthful kids' options can only serve to reassure parents, who serve as menu guardians for their youngest children, but play a role in guiding kids' choices toward health all the way through adolescence. But ultimately, with the power to help shape what kids eat, restaurant operators are in the drivers' seat, suggesting that the promise of kids' health on the menu can go hand in hand with customer satisfaction.



Kids are big business

Today, at a time when dining out is woven into the fabric of the American lifestyle, adults are going to restaurants with kids in tow more than ever.

The success of restaurants depends on understanding children—their appetites, their food interests, their nutritional needs, their opinions—and the relationship they have with their parents at the dining table.

A menu just for them

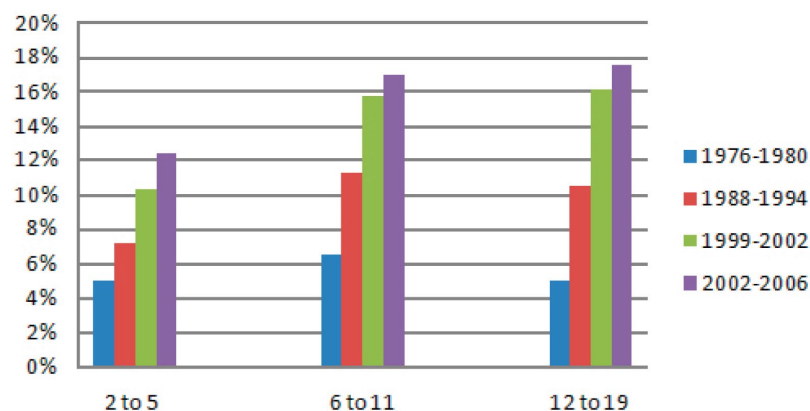
One simple way to target kids at restaurants involves creating a menu just for them. And while “fast food” restaurants are kid magnets, the need to cater to children’s needs extends to every dining segment to which the parents bring them—all the way through fine dining. This is why kids’ menus should be an important consideration for almost any restaurant operator.

And kids do use the menus. Parents say that if a “kids’ menu” is available at the restaurant, their child/children aged 1-5 normally orders/order from the “kids’ menu” instead of the “regular menu” more than 80% of the time. Even 66% of kids aged 6-11 normally use the kids’ menu. Only when they reach 12 years of age does kids’ menu use really drop off.

But obesity affects kids, too

But kids are pretty similar to adults in a very important way: when they take in more calories than their bodies need, they can gain weight. Not surprisingly, the struggles many adults are having with their weight apply to kids, too. This underscores why, when it comes to kids, health on the menu is probably the most important issue facing the restaurant industry today.

Prevalence of Obesity Among U.S. Kids and Teens



Source: CDC/National Center for Health Statistics, National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES)

Attention to nutritional claims on kids' menus has improved in recent years—but trend momentum suggests that there remains a ways to go.



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Nutritional Choices

The number of kids' menu items making nutritional claims has risen sharply from 2005-2008. In 2008, menu items with nutritional claims accounted for 7.7% of all menu items introduced, compared to only 2.6% in 2005. (source: Mintel Menu Insights)

However, limited service restaurant chains such as Panera Bread, Jason's Deli, Cheebo and Arby's have all added organic or all-natural ingredients to their kids' menus—an interesting place for “green” ingredients because it influences parental decision and exposes children to the concept from a young age.

Sides are a kid's best friends. Especially small children, who can use sides for a meal. And it's almost un-American to think that a kid wouldn't like fries.

When we analyze sides on the children's menu, there are at first glance no surprises: fries and potatoes are at the top of the ingredients list.

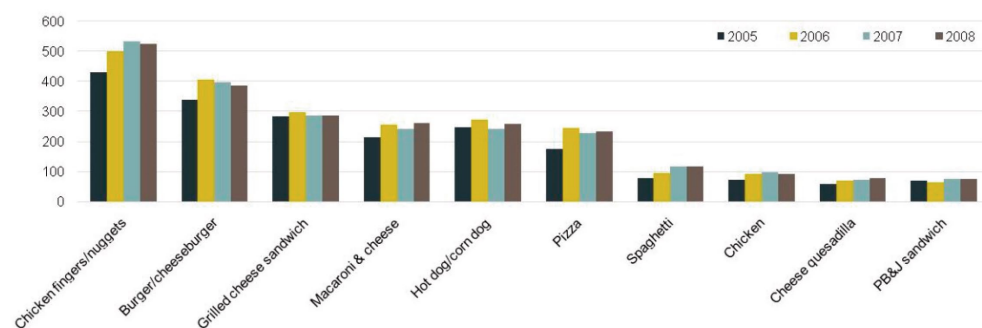
But wait...are fruits and vegetables gaining some ground? From Q1 2007 to Q1 2009, that is indeed the case, with fruit ingredients up 2.4% and vegetable ingredients up 6.8%.

These gains in fruits and vegetables are no small feat. Let's face it: the phrase “eat your fruits and vegetables” has historically implied dragging children toward them. Perhaps change is in the wind.

Sides on Children's Menus

	% of Menu Items Q1 2007	% of Menu Items Q1 2009	% change
Fries	14.3	14.6	2.1
Potato	11.4	11.1	-2.6
Onion	9.2	9.7	5.4
Cheese	8.9	9.0	1.1
Chicken	7.4	7.8	5.4
Tomato	5.8	6.2	6.9
Vegetable	5.9	6.3	6.8
Beef	5.7	5.4	-5.3
Bacon	4.4	4.2	-4.5
Fruit	4.1	4.2	2.4
Other	22.9	21.5	-6.1

Top 10 Dishes on Childrens' Menus



Source: Mintel Menu Insights

Spinning the familiar with the new

Putting new spins on old favorites not only promises added variety. Like the perfect fisherman's cast into a river, it might hook people on health before they know it.

- Burger King's apple fries are a great example.
- Fun dairy options like string cheese at Sonic.

Other healthful innovations creep onto the menu

Pasta, turkey sandwiches and grilled chicken strips are “standout” healthful menu items that promise kids' interest. Operators will need to continue offering healthful dishes like these and others to respond to the interest in having nutritional options on kids' menus

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Source **MINTEL** Menu Insights



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