



# Evaluating Fast Food Nutrition and Marketing to Youth



**YALE RUDD CENTER**  
FOR FOOD POLICY & OBESITY

**Jennifer L. Harris, Ph.D., M.B.A.**  
**Marlene B. Schwartz, Ph.D.**  
**Kelly D. Brownell, Ph.D.**

## WHY FAST FOOD?

**The research is clear:** Consuming fast food endangers young people's health. Young people who eat fast food consume more calories, fat, sugar, and sugar-sweetened beverages, and less fiber, milk, fruit and vegetables than peers who do not eat fast food.<sup>1</sup> If today's youth consumed fast food occasionally, this would not be a public health crisis. But every day, one-third of American children and adolescents eat fast food.<sup>2</sup> Fast food contributes 16-17% of adolescents' total caloric intake.<sup>3</sup>

The fast food industry spent more than 4.2 billion dollars in 2009 to advertise their products to all audiences.<sup>4</sup> They are marketing to children and teens more than ever – exposure to fast food ads on TV increased by 21% for preschoolers, 34% for children (2-11), and 39% for teens (12-17) from 2003 to 2009. Marketing goes far beyond television ads. The companies use websites, banner ads, and social and mobile media to reach young people.

**The White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity** states that restaurants “have an important role to play in creating a food marketing environment that supports, rather than undermines, the efforts of parents and other caregivers to encourage healthy eating among children and prevent obesity.”<sup>5</sup>

**The restaurant industry response:** The two largest fast food advertisers to children, McDonald's and Burger King, have joined the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) pledging to advertise only “better-for-you” choices to children,<sup>6</sup> and the majority of restaurants have introduced some more nutritious options to their menus.<sup>7</sup>

**But critical questions remain:** Are these actions having a positive impact? Or, does the sheer volume of marketing for restaurants' least nutritious options eclipse any positive efforts?

## THE RESTAURANTS IN THIS STUDY



### Fast food ads viewed in 2009

Restaurant	2009 ad spend (in millions)	Ages 2-5	Ages 6-11	Ages 12-17
McDonald's	\$898.1	309	368	284
Subway	\$424.6	97	127	177
Wendy's	\$282.6	46	58	113
Burger King	\$281.6	152	185	189
KFC	\$268.9	62	78	146
Taco Bell	\$243.4	50	69	140
Pizza Hut	\$221.8	54	69	125
Sonic	\$185.1	27	37	68
Domino's	\$180.8	35	46	85
Dunkin' Donuts	\$120.9	11	15	28
Dairy Queen	\$77.6	20	27	48
Starbucks	\$28.9	--	--	--
<b>All fast food</b>	<b>\$4,217.7</b>	<b>1,021</b>	<b>1,272</b>	<b>1,723</b>

Source: The Nielsen Company (2010)



## THE ANALYSES

Fast Food FACTS provides comprehensive and science-based information about fast food marketing practices and young people's fast food purchases. This study documents, in detail, the menu items offered and sold in fast food restaurants and how they are marketed to youth.

**Menu composition** – Nutrient content and comparison of all menu items offered as of January 2010 at the 12 largest restaurants in sales and marketing to youth.

**External advertising** – Data measures how restaurants *pull* customers inside. Includes syndicated data from The Nielsen Company (Nielsen), comScore Inc., and Arbitron Inc. on ad spending and youth exposure to ads on TV, radio and internet, and analyses of the content of these ads and social, viral and mobile marketing.

**In-store marketing** – Documents how restaurants *push* sales of individual menu items inside the restaurants. Research includes an audit of more than 1,000 restaurants nationwide to measure in-store signs and pricing, and a study of the items offered by restaurant employees when customers order kids' meals and combo meals.

**Marketing outcomes** – Measures the effectiveness of these marketing strategies, using data from The NPD Group's CREST service on menu item purchases and a survey of parents to measure frequency of visits to top fast food restaurants with their children, what they buy, and why.

## MARKETING WORKS

\*\*\*\*\*

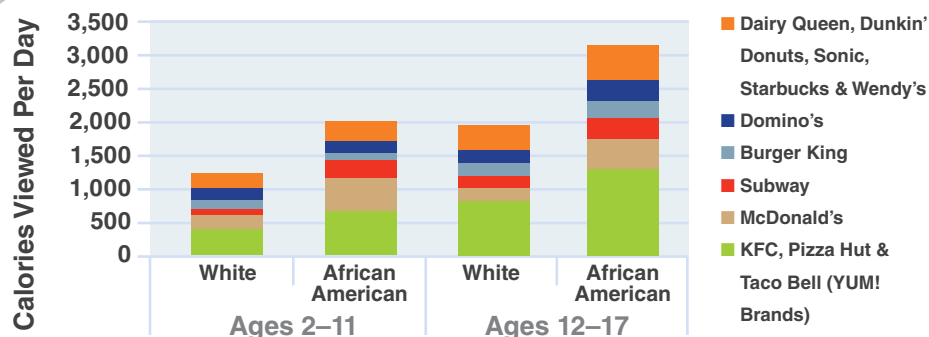
40% OF PARENTS REPORT THAT THEIR CHILDREN ASK THEM TO GO TO MCDONALD'S AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK; 15% OF PRESCHOOLERS ASK TO GO EVERY DAY.

84% REPORTED TAKING THEIR CHILD TO A FAST FOOD RESTAURANT AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK; 66% REPORTED GOING TO MCDONALD'S IN THE PAST WEEK.





## CALORIES VIEWED DAILY IN FAST FOOD TV ADS



Source: The Nielsen Company (ad exposure data) and TV ad nutrition analysis

## RESULTS

### How healthy are fast food meals?

- **Only 12 of 3,039 possible kids' meal combinations meet nutrition criteria for preschoolers. Only 15 meet nutrition criteria for older children.**
- Teens between the ages of 13 and 17 purchase 800 to 1,200 calories in an average fast food meal, including 30% or more of calories from sugar and saturated fat.
- At most restaurants, young people purchase one-half or more of their maximum daily recommended sodium intake in just one meal.

### Fries and sugary beverages are the order of the day.

Researchers ordered kids' meals at 250 fast food restaurants across the country to find out how often restaurant employees offer healthy beverage and side dish options at the point-of-sale.

- **At McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's and Taco Bell, employees automatically served french fries or another unhealthy side more than 84% of the time. A soft drink or other unhealthy beverage was served at least 72% of the time.**
- **Subway was the sole exception**, offering healthy sides and beverages 60% of the time.

### When are teens eating fast food?

- Teens order more fast food than any other age group during non-meal times, after school and in the evening.<sup>8</sup>
- **Snacks and desserts often marketed directly to teens contain as many as 1,500 calories**, which is five times more than the American Dietetic Association's recommendation of a 200-300 calorie snack for active teens.<sup>9</sup>

### Has the youth marketing landscape improved?

The fast food industry continues to relentlessly market to youth.

- The average preschooler (2-5) sees almost three ads per day for fast food; children (6-11) see three-and-a-half; and teens see almost five.
- **Children's exposure to fast food TV ads is increasing**, even for ads from McDonald's and Burger King, who have pledged to reduce unhealthy marketing to children. Compared with 2007, in 2009 children (6-11) saw 26% more ads for McDonald's, 10% more for Burger King, and 59% more for Subway.
- Children see more than just ads intended for kids. **More than 60% of fast food ads viewed by children (2-11) were for foods other than kids' meals.**

### Youth-targeted marketing has spread to company websites, social networks and other digital media.

- **Web-based targeting starts as young as age 2 through websites such as McDonald's Ronald.com.**
- McDonald's and Burger King have created sophisticated advergames and virtual worlds to engage children (e.g., McWorld.com, HappyMeal.com, and ClubBK.com).
- **McDonald's' 13 websites get 365,000 unique child visitors and 294,000 unique teen visitors each month.**
- Nine restaurant Facebook pages had more than one million fans, and Starbucks' page boasted more than 11.3 million in July 2010.
- Eight of the fast food chains have smartphone apps to reach young consumers anytime, anywhere.

### Fast food marketing targets vulnerable groups – often with less healthy items.

- **Hispanic preschoolers see 290 Spanish-language fast food TV ads each year** and McDonald's is responsible for one-quarter of young people's exposure to Spanish-language fast food advertising.
- **African American children and teens see at least 50% more fast food ads** than their white peers. McDonald's and KFC specifically target African American youth with TV advertising, targeted websites, and banner ads.
- Taco Bell targets teens in its TV and radio advertising. Dairy Queen, Sonic and Domino's target teens with ads for their desserts and snacks, and Burger King advertises teen-targeted promotions.

### IS GETTING A HEALTHY FAST FOOD MEAL POSSIBLE?

\*\*\*\*\*

**THE GOOD NEWS:** YES – THE MAJORITY OF RESTAURANTS OFFER SOME HEALTHFUL CHOICES ON THEIR REGULAR AND KIDS' MENUS.

**THE BAD NEWS:** IT'S NOT EASY – JUST 17% OF MENU ITEMS QUALIFY AS HEALTHY CHOICES AND RESTAURANTS RARELY PROMOTE BETTER OPTIONS IN ADVERTISING OR INSIDE THE RESTAURANT. THE AVERAGE RESTAURANT HAS 15 PRODUCT-SPECIFIC SIGNS – ONLY 4% PROMOTE HEALTHY MENU ITEMS.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Young people must consume less of the calorie-dense nutrient-poor foods served at fast food restaurants.

Fast food restaurants must drastically change their current marketing practices so that children and teens do not receive continuous encouragement to seek out food that is ultimately, and severely, damaging their health.



### Fast food restaurants must establish meaningful standards for child-targeted marketing that apply to all fast food restaurants — not just those who voluntarily participate in the CFBAI.

- Nutrition criteria for foods presented in child-targeted marketing must apply to all kids' meals served, not just items pictured in marketing.
- Restaurants must redefine "child-targeted" marketing to include the 60% of TV ads and other forms of marketing viewed by children but not exclusively targeted to them.
- McDonald's must stop marketing directly to preschoolers who are too young to have the capability to resist or question marketing efforts.

### Fast food restaurants must do more to develop and promote lower calorie and more nutritious menu items.

- Restaurants must increase the number of healthy items on their menus.
- Popular items should be reformulated to decrease the saturated fat, sodium, and calories in the average entrée.
- Kids' meal options must be developed to meet the needs of both the preschoolers and older children who consume them.

### Fast food restaurants must do more to push their lower calorie and more nutritious menu items inside the restaurants when young people and parents make their final purchase decisions.

- Healthier sides and beverages must be the default option when ordering kids' meals. Parents can request the french fries and soft drink if they want, but parents — not restaurants — should make that decision. McDonald's claims that they sell millions of Happy Meals. Simply making the default option the healthy option would reduce children's consumption by billions of calories per year.
- The smallest size and most healthy version should be the default option for all menu items.
- Portions of menu items that come in different sizes (e.g., small, medium, and large) should be consistent across restaurants.

\*\*\*\*\*  
FOR INFORMATION ABOUT HEALTHY CALORIE  
AND SODIUM CONSUMPTION FOR CHILDREN,  
AS WELL AS NUTRITION INFORMATION FOR  
THOUSANDS OF FAST FOOD ITEMS, PLEASE  
VISIT [WWW.FASTFOODMARKETING.ORG](http://WWW.FASTFOODMARKETING.ORG).