

## Why fast food?

The research is clear. Eating fast food harms young people's health. Children and adolescents 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.<sup>1-4</sup> If they ate fast food only occasionally, this would not be problematic. But every day, one-third of American children and adolescents eat fast food,<sup>5</sup> and fast food contributes 16% to 17% of adolescents' total caloric intake.<sup>6</sup>

Fast food restaurants extensively market to young people. In 2006, fast food restaurants spent approximately \$300 million in marketing specifically designed to reach children and teens, and an estimated \$360 million on toys distributed as premiums with children's meals.<sup>7</sup> In 2007, young people viewed more TV ads for fast food than any other food category: 2.9 fast food ads per day for the average child (6-11 years) and 4.1 per day for the average teen (12-17 years).<sup>8</sup> These marketing efforts are targeted even to preschoolers.<sup>9</sup> In addition, children's exposure to fast food TV advertising increased by 12% from 2003 to 2007 at the same time that advertisers for most other food product categories reduced their TV ads to children.<sup>10</sup>

The White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity has stated 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>11</sup> The fast food industry has responded to this and other calls for change.<sup>12</sup> Two of the 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>13</sup> Most restaurants have also introduced more nutritious options for both children and adults to their menus.<sup>14</sup>

But critical questions remain: Do these actions have a positive impact? Or, does the sheer volume of fast food marketing eclipse any of these industry initiatives?

## Fast Food FACTS

This report addresses the need for comprehensive, reliable, and current information about fast food marketing and how it affects young people. We focus our analyses on the twelve restaurants with the highest sales and advertising to youth in 2009 and document three components of their marketing plans:

- **Menu composition** provides nutrient content data and comparison of all menu items offered as of January 2010, including items on kids' meal, dollar/value, and healthy menus.
- **External advertising** includes data to measure advertising practices that reach customers outside the restaurant to *pull* them inside. We examine advertising spending, TV ads, internet marketing, social media, viral marketing,

and signs outside restaurants. We use syndicated media data from The Nielsen Company (Nielsen), comScore Inc., and Arbitron Inc. When these data were not available, we commissioned or implemented our own studies to measure the extent that restaurants engaged in these practices. In addition, we conducted content analyses to assess the products, target audiences, messages, and techniques in the ads.

- **In-store marketing** presents data to assess marketing practices inside restaurants to *push* sales of individual menu items. This research includes an audit of more than 1,000 restaurants nationwide to measure in-store signs, pricing practices, and the products and messages promoted. We also conducted a study of restaurant sales practices at 250 restaurants to document the products encouraged at the point-of-sale when ordering kids' meals and combo meals.

To measure the **outcomes** of these marketing practices, we purchased market research data from The NPD Group's CREST service to quantify the types of products most often purchased. We also conducted a survey of parents of 2- to 11-year-olds to measure the frequency of their visits to fast food restaurants with their children, what menu items they buy, and why.

## Results

Fast food marketing is relentless.

- The fast food industry spent more than \$4.2 billion in 2009 on TV advertising, radio, magazines, outdoor advertising, and other media.
- The average preschooler (2-5 years) saw 2.8 TV ads for fast food *every day* in 2009; children (6-11 years) saw 3.5; and teens (12-17 years) saw 4.7.
- Young people's exposure to fast food TV ads has increased. Compared to 2003, preschoolers viewed 21% more fast food ads in 2009, children viewed 34% more, and teens viewed 39% more.
- McDonald's and Burger King have pledged to improve food marketing to children. However, both restaurants increased their volume of TV advertising from 2007 to 2009. Preschoolers saw 21% more ads for McDonald's and 9% more for Burger King, and children viewed 26% more ads for McDonald's and 10% more for Burger King.
- Although McDonald's and Burger King only showed their “better-for-you” foods in child-targeted marketing, their ads did not encourage consumption of these healthier choices. Instead, child-targeted ads focused on toy giveaways and building brand loyalty.
- Children saw more than just child-targeted ads. More than 60% of fast food ads viewed by preschoolers and children promoted fast food items other than kids' meals and promotions.

Youth-targeted marketing has spread to company websites and other digital media.

- McDonald's web-based marketing starts with children as young as 2 at Ronald.com.
- McDonald's and Burger King created sophisticated websites with 60 to 100 pages of advergaming and virtual worlds to engage children (McWorld.com, HappyMeal.com, and ClubBK.com).
- McDonald's thirteen websites attracted 365,000 unique child visitors and 294,000 unique teen visitors on average each month in 2009.
- Nine restaurant Facebook pages had more than one million fans as of July 2010, and Starbucks boasted more than 11.3 million fans.
- Smartphone apps were available for eight fast food chains, providing another opportunity to reach young consumers anytime, anywhere.

Fast food marketing also targets teens and ethnic and minority youth – often with less healthy items.

- Taco Bell TV and radio advertising reached more teens than adults and Burger King advertised teen-targeted promotions. Dairy Queen, Sonic, and Domino's also reached teens disproportionately with ads for their desserts and snacks.
- Hispanic preschoolers saw 290 Spanish-language fast food TV ads in 2009 and McDonald's was responsible for one-quarter of young people's exposure to Spanish-language fast food advertising.
- African American children and teens saw at least 50% more fast food ads on TV than their white peers. That translated into twice as many calories viewed in fast food ads daily compared to white children.
- McDonald's and KFC specifically targeted African American youth with TV advertising, websites, and banner ads. African American teens viewed 75% more TV ads for McDonald's and KFC compared to white teens.

Fast food marketing works.

- Eighty-four percent of parents reported taking their child to a fast food restaurant at least once in the past week; 66% reported going to McDonald's.
- Forty-seven percent of parents who went to McDonald's reported that the main reason they went there was because their child likes it. This rate was significantly higher than the percent who reported that they took their child to Burger King, Subway, or Wendy's primarily because their child likes it (31%, 20%, 19%, respectively)
- Forty percent of parents reported that their child asks to go to McDonald's at least once a week; 15% of preschoolers ask to go every day.

Most restaurants do offer some healthful and lower-calorie choices on their regular and children's menus, but unhealthy options are the default inside the restaurants.

- Just 12 of 3,039 possible kids' meal combinations met nutrition criteria for preschoolers; 15 met nutrition criteria for older children.
- Just 17% of regular menu items qualified as healthful choices. Most of these items were low or no-calorie beverages (e.g., coffee and diet soft drinks). In contrast, 12% of lunch/dinner sides met nutrition criteria, and 5% or less of lunch/dinner main dishes and breakfast items met the criteria.
- Snacks and dessert items contained as many as 1,500 calories, which is five times more than the 200 to 300 calorie snack recommended by the American Dietetic Association for active teens.<sup>15</sup>
- The average restaurant had 15 signs promoting specific menu items, but just 4% promoted healthy menu items.
- When ordering a kids' meal, restaurant employees at McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and Taco Bell automatically served french fries or another unhealthy side dish more than 84% of the time. A healthy beverage was offered less than 50% of the time.
- Subway offered apple slices or yogurt and low-fat plain milk or 100% juice with their kids' meals 60% of the time, making it the only fast food restaurant in our study to routinely provide healthy choices.

As a result,

- At McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's, approximately two-thirds of parents who ordered a kids' meal for their child ordered french fries and one-third to one-half ordered a soft drink. In contrast, two-thirds ordered fruit or yogurt and juice or plain milk with a kids' meal at Subway.
- Parents of elementary school-age children were more likely to order a combo meal or dollar/value menu items for their child than a kids' meal.
- Teens between the ages of 13 and 18 ordered 800 to 1,100 calories in an average fast food visit. This age group ordered many of the highest-calorie, nutrient-poor items on fast food menus, including large and extra-large french fries and soft drinks and large-sized burgers.
- Teens were also more likely to visit a fast food restaurant for an afternoon or evening snack compared to any other age group; and they purchased the most desserts, breads and sweet breads.
- At least 30% of calories in menu items ordered by children and teens were from sugar and saturated fat. At most restaurants, young people ordered at least half of their maximum daily recommended sodium intake in just one fast food meal.

## Recommendations

Young people must consume less of the calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods served at fast food restaurants. Parents and schools can do more to teach children how to make healthy choices. Above all, 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 will severely damage their health. In addition, when young people visit, the restaurants should do more to encourage the purchase of more healthful options.

### 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

- Restaurants must apply “better-for-you” standards to kids’ meals served, not just items pictured in child-directed marketing.
- Restaurants must redefine “child-directed” marketing to include TV ads and other forms of marketing viewed by large numbers of children but not exclusively targeted to them.
- Child-targeted marketing must do more to persuade children to want the healthy options available, not just to encourage them to visit the restaurants.
- McDonald’s must stop marketing directly to preschoolers.

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

- The focus in all forms of marketing must be reversed to emphasize the healthier options instead of the high-calorie poor quality items now promoted most extensively.

- Restaurants must increase the relative number of low-calorie, more nutritious 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 nutrition 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 french fries and soft drinks if they want, but parents – not restaurants – should make that decision. McDonald’s claims that it sells millions of Happy Meals. Simply making the healthy option the default could reduce children’s consumption by billions of calories per year.
- The smallest size and most healthful version should be the default option for all menu items.
- Portion sizes (e.g., small, medium, and large) should be consistent for similar menu items across restaurants.

According to the data in this report, fast food restaurants spend billions of dollars in marketing every year to increase the number of times that customers visit their restaurants, encourage visits for new eating occasions and purchases of specific menu items (rarely the healthy options), and create lifelong, loyal customers. By creating more healthful items and marketing them more effectively, fast food restaurants could attract lifelong customers who will also live longer, healthier lives.