

Encouraging children to order healthier foods in restaurants

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Recent findings have shown that families are eating out at restaurants more often. Credit: Ed Montez/Pixabay

Recent trends and findings suggest that families are spending more money eating out at restaurants. This trend is concerning to researchers, as children's menus at full-service restaurants generally do not follow nutritional standards set forth by the National Restaurant Association. These standards include the Kids LiveWell initiative, which recommends that children's meals contain 600 calories or less per entrée.

An interdisciplinary team of researchers, led by SDSU professors Guadalupe X. Ayala and Iana A. Castro, conducted a study to determine what factors influence children's food ordering to develop an understanding of how to encourage [healthier choices](#).

The team observed and interviewed 102 dining parties with children in independent, full-service restaurants. Upon compiling their findings, they determined that:

- 60 percent of children knew what they wanted to order prior to arriving at the restaurant and 92 percent ordered their preordained choice.
- Parents were involved in ordering 93 percent of the time for children between the ages of three and six and 54 percent of the time for children between the ages of 12 and 14.
- Servers suggested child menu options only 27 percent of the time and almost never suggested healthy options.
- Taste preferences, family members and features of the printed menu also influenced ordering.
- None of the restaurants studied offered nutritional information for any of their menu options.

The researchers concluded that improving children's menu options may not be enough to lead to healthier ordering. A better understanding of the underlying factors that influence what children want to order at restaurants will help address child health issues such as obesity.

"Our research suggests that influencing what is ordered for, and by, children may need to begin before the dining party arrives at the restaurant," Castro said. "Furthermore, encouraging diners to order healthy children's menu choices may be helped by strategies that target both parents and [children](#) once they are in the restaurant."

More information: Iana A Castro et al. Food ordering for children in restaurants: multiple sources of influence on decision making, *Public Health Nutrition* (2016). [DOI: 10.1017/S1368980016001403](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980016001403)

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