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Assessing the Availability and Acceptability of Healthy Children's Menu Choices in Sit-Down Restaurants

Megan Ehrlich

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Americans aged eight and older eat out approximately four times per week (Serrano & Jedda, 2009). Because of the availability of restaurant food to children, a three part exploratory study including a parent survey, group discussion with restaurant managers and evaluation of restaurant children's menus was conducted. Parents (n=105) were given a valid and reliable questionnaire to assess knowledge, attitudes and behaviors in relationship to eating out with their children. Ninety-four percent felt restaurants should offer more healthy choices on children's menus. Parents who had completed training/education after high school were more likely to feel that they were good role models on healthy eating for their children ($\alpha=11.9$; $p<.05$). However, parents who felt that they were knowledgeable in eating healthy were more likely to not answer the knowledge questions correctly on the survey ($\alpha=117.4$; $p<.05$). The majority (68%) of parents would like to have a website available with information on how to make healthy choices at restaurants. A group discussion (n=4) was held to gain restaurant managers' views on offering healthy menu choices for children. Overall, managers felt that children's menus did not offer healthy choices. Their concerns for offering healthy food choices included cost and customer demand. In addition, they did not feel that having nutritional information available on their menus would dissuade people from ordering food, but the cost of producing this information was a concern. Restaurants' children's menus (n=71) were evaluated using a valid tool. Thirty-five percent offered a healthy entrée

choice, forty-eight percent offered a healthy side option and thirteen percent offered either skim or 1% milk. The results of this study will allow for the development of educational tools to assist not only parents but restaurant managers on ways to choose and provide healthy food choices on children's menus.

Serrano, E. and Jedda, V.B. (2009) Comparison of fast-food and non-fast-food children's menu items. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 41: 132-137.