

Taking a Stand Against Childhood Obesity

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According to [a 2005 report published by the Institute of Medicine](#), "Over the past three decades, [the rate of childhood obesity] has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2 to 5 years and adolescents aged 12 to 19 years, and it has more than tripled for children aged 6 to 11 years. At present, approximately nine million children over 6 years of age are considered obese."¹ The reason for this alarming rise in childhood obesity is simple: Children are eating more calories than they burn. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "Large portion sizes for food and beverages, eating meals away from home, frequent snacking on energy-dense foods and consuming beverages with added sugar are often hypothesized as contributing to excess energy intake of children and teens."²

The McDonald's "Happy Meal" has made the news recently, with the McDonald's corporation being put on notice of an impending lawsuit by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit organization. In a letter to McDonald's dated June 22, 2010, the CSPI stated:

Fast-food companies - with McDonald's by far in the lead - spent over \$520 million in 2006 on advertising and toys to market children's meals. Toy premiums made up almost three-quarters of those expenses, totaling over \$350 million. According to data from The NPD Group, in 2006, fast food restaurants sold more than 1.2 billion children's meals with toys to children ages 12 and under, accounting for 20% of all child traffic at those restaurants.

By advertising that Happy Meals include toys, McDonald's unfairly and deceptively markets directly to children. When McDonald's bombards children with advertisements or other marketing for Happy Meals with toys, many children will pester their parents to take them to McDonald's. Once there, they are more than likely to receive a meal that is too high in calories, saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium, and devoid of whole grains. Developing a lifelong habit of eating unhealthy meals is likely to promote obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and other life-threatening or debilitating diet-related diseases.

Consider the Happy Meal composed of a cheeseburger, French fries, and Sprite. That meal has 640 calories (half a day's worth for young children), 7 grams of saturated fat (half the 14-gram recommended limit), 940 milligrams of sodium (about three-fourths of the 1,200-milligram limit), and 35 grams of sugar (about two days' worth). Moreover, the bun is made with white, not whole wheat, flour. Although the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends diets centered on vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low-fat dairy, and lean protein, McDonald's Happy Meals consist largely of white flour, fried meat, fried potatoes, salt, and refined sugars.

More specifically, and for purposes of our notice of intent to sue, McDonald's has engaged in unfair and deceptive acts and practices by advertising and including toys with purchases of Happy Meals. McDonald's practices violate state consumer protection laws,

such as Massachusetts G.L. c. 93A, Texas Business & Professions Code S 17.41 et seq., District of Columbia Code S 28-3905 et seq., New Jersey Statutes Ann. 56:8-1 et seq., and California Business & Professions Code Section 17200.³⁻⁵

The letter from the CSPI comes just months after Santa Clara County, Calif., passed an [ordinance banning the sale of toys and other promotions in conjunction with unhealthy meals](#).⁶ While the ordinance is reportedly the first in the country, it's likely not to be the last. The issue comes down to whether it is a fair and appropriate marketing practice for fast-food restaurants to use toys and other promotions to induce children to consume food that almost everyone agrees is not as healthy as they should be eating.

By the way, [a subsequent letter from McDonald's CEO Jim Skinner to the CSPI](#) criticized the lawsuit threat and stated, in part: "CSPI's twisted characterization of McDonald's as 'the stranger in the playground handing out candy to children' is an insult to every one of our franchisees and employees around the world. When CSPI refers to America's children as 'an unpaid drone army,' you similarly denigrate parents and families, because they are fully capable of making their own decisions. You should apologize."⁷

The obvious question is: If parents and families are capable of making their own decisions (but seem to be doing an increasingly poor job when it comes to health), and companies like McDonald's believe they have limited or no responsibility, then who's advocating for the health of our children?

Because we believe in this issue, we have established a Web page that you and your patients can visit, fill in your name and e-mail address, and send an e-mail to the McDonald's leadership asking them to offer healthier children's meals and stop using toys to bribe children to consume their products. That Web page is www.dynamicchiropractic.com/happymeal.

If you would like to provide information about this issue that your patients can read once they leave your office, you can download and copy a one-page summary from: www.dynamicchiropractic.com/happymealinfo. This summary also includes the Web page information.

There is a trust relationship between a company like McDonald's and the consumers it serves. Companies like these should be willing to change what they offer our children for the greater good of their health and future. By educating your patients and your community about this issue, you will encourage them to get more involved in how their children eat. You will also make them aware of the millions of dollars spent each year to influence their children's lifelong eating habits.

This is an issue the chiropractic profession can and should get involved in. It demonstrates our concern for wellness, proper nutrition and children's health, and is an opportunity to show your interest in the health of the children in your community. Together, we *can* make an impact.

References

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AUGUST 2010