Finding Healthy Fare for Kids

By Marina Byrd

Thursday, August 1, 2013 at 11:16 AM

When New York City passed the first menu labeling law in 2008 to combat obesity, it didn’t change the number of calories people consumed, found a 2009 study published in Health Affairs, an academic health policy and research journal.

But when restaurants offered lower-calorie meals, people would choose them over higher-calorie fare, a 2011 study published in the British Medical Journal found.

That’s what Healthy Fare for Kids, a Chicago-based organization, is trying to promote. It brings various stakeholders to the business table to make eating out healthier, especially for children. It is a community-based organization endorsed by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, but founder Diane Schmidt said the Healthy Fare for Kids blueprint can be followed by other states.

“You need to get all the players involved,” said Schmidt. State legislators and other policymakers need to reach out to schools, businesses and restaurants, she said. Schmidt also encourages including celebrity chefs in the plan to really get the public interested and excited about healthful meals.

“The worst food is in restaurants is always on the kids’ menu,” said the mother of a 10-year old-daughter. Schmidt was frustrated by a decade of unhealthful foods on the kids’ menu and decided to do something about it.

The British Medical Journal study—which spanned a year before the New York calorie-posting law was enacted in 2008 until nine months after—found McDonalds, Au Bon Pain and KFC spiced up their low-calorie meals once the law was enacted, which prompted customers to choose them more often.

Healthy Fare for Kids developed nutrition guidelines for chefs to follow. Chicago restaurants can take part in the movement by offering at least one children’s’ meal that meets the guidelines.

“We wanted the guidelines to be intuitive as possible,” said Schmidt. “We don’t want to put a mathematical equation in front of them because they don’t have time, resources or manpower.”

One guideline is to use lean protein that is free of antibiotics and growth hormones. Protein is essential to a healthy diet and helps prevent children from eating too much starchy food. Another is to use whole grains and keep food local and seasonal when possible. Whole grains are more nutrient-dense and packed with fiber compared to highly refined products.
The Shedd Aquarium in Chicago now carries kid-friendly meals that meet the guidelines. Parents can easily tell which meals meet the healthy guidelines by the Healthy Fare for Kids logo. Signs in the cafeteria explain the program and meals.

Ditka’s, Ritz Carlton Chicago and Frontera Grill are the other restaurants participating in the program.

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Midway International Airport joined in the campaign at the beginning of July. Healthy Fare for Kids partnered with Premiere Restaurant Group to provide grab-and-go meals in Concourses A and B and by baggage claim. The logo also will be added to menu boards to show qualified meals.

The purpose of the meals and logo is not only to create healthful meals, but also to “stick in peoples’ minds and create discussion,” said Schmidt. “Fifty percent of food dollars are spent outside the home. Let’s look at that 50 percent.”

Resources:

- CDC: “Adult Obesity Facts” [3]
- Healthy Fare for Kids [5]

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