Strategies to improve children's menu offerings in restaurant settings: a literature review
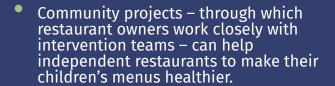
39 studies were identified that examined the following objectives:

1 The effectiveness of initiatives in restaurants to improve the nutritional content of children's meals.

2 The effectiveness of initiatives to encourage parents and children to order healthier children's meals.

3 What motivates food businesses to participate in initiatives and identify barriers to participation.

4 Whether the evidence base considers the impact of initiatives on profitability and food waste.

The results of the literature review found the following:

1 Objective 1

- Community projects – through which restaurant owners work closely with intervention teams – can help independent restaurants to make their children's menus healthier.

- Mandatory legislation and voluntary schemes to improve the nutritional content of meals are of limited effectiveness in encouraging restaurants to make children's menus healthier.

2 Objective 2

- Giving away free toys with healthier meals can encourage children to choose smaller, lower-calorie meals over larger ones.

- Designing menus so that healthier food and drink items are the default options can encourage parents and children to choose healthier options.

- Including calorie information on menus is not effective at encouraging parents and children to order healthier meals.

- Strategies which "signpost" healthier options in restaurants and on menus may encourage children and parents to order healthier meals in the short term, but changes in behaviour are not sustained in the long-term.

- Changing social norms around healthy eating, through provision of nutrition information, is of limited effectiveness at encouraging parents to choose healthier restaurant meals for their children.

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3 Objective 3

Motivators for businesses

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- There is some limited evidence that an interest in promoting children's health, on the part of the restaurant owner or manager, may act as a motivator.

- More managers may be supportive of healthier children's menus, if the value of policies to improve the nutritional quality of children's meals is explained to them.

- Findings from studies of community projects show that buy-in from owners and managers can be achieved through building relationships.

- Collaborative approaches to menu design are also important in securing restaurant support.

Barriers for businesses

- Corporate policy, which restricts the ability of restaurants to participate in children's menu reformulation initiatives.

- A perception among restaurant managers that there is limited customer demand for healthier children's meals.

- A perception that restaurants are not responsible for customers' choices.

- Limited awareness of legislation introduced to improve the food environment.

- Lack of flexibility to change as children's menus are often fixed and developed out of what is already available in the kitchen.

- Perception that involvement in reformulation initiatives would be time and resource heavy.

4 Objective 4

Profitability
- There is some limited evidence suggesting that healthier children's menus can be commercially viable and operationally feasible.

- While studies show a perception among some restaurant managers that healthy drink policies negatively impact on sales, the present literature review found no evidence to support this.

Food waste
- The present study found no evidence relating to the impact of initiatives to promote healthier children's meals on food waste.

Conclusion

- Overall, community projects, and the offer of free toys with meals and healthier default food and drink options in restaurants, showed potential as strategies to improve children's meals in restaurant settings.

- However, the quality of the evidence base is limited and further research is needed on specific strategies and impact of initiatives.