

- **Project Title:** Are Fast Food Menus Contributing to Overweight Children?

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Project Summary:

Health officials have become alarmed by the rapid rise in obesity among American children. Predictions are that 2010, almost 20% of children in the United States will be overweight. Among Mexican American and African American youth, the rates are around 40%. If this overweight segment of society does not reverse itself, we will see a continued increase in health problems such as Type II diabetes and heart disease in children.

Because of the importance of this problem an experiment was designed to test whether providing calorie and fat content information or a heart symbol denoting healthier choices to children ages 6-11 will favorably affect their meal choices at fast food restaurants. Children (240) were recruited through the Girl and Boy Scouts. The experiment consisted of three conditions: (1) no nutrition information, (2) calorie and fat content next to menu items, and (3) a heart-healthy symbol next to healthy items. Tri-fold poster boards were developed based on menu boards at McDonald's and Wendy's and each child was shown a menu board from each restaurant and asked to make a meal selection. Additional data was collected via child and parent questionnaires. Preliminary results from the study include: (1) many children want to eat healthy, (2) females made healthier choices than males, (3) nutrition information can affect behavior, and (4) pictorial information may be more effective for children than verbal information.

Publications:

Smith, K.H., G.M. Zank and M.A. Stutts (2008), "Are Fast-Food Menus Contributing to Overweight Children?" forthcoming, Marketing and Public Policy Conference Proceedings, Philadelphia, PA, May 2008.

Presentations:

Presented at the Marketing and Public Policy Conference, in Philadelphia, PA, May 30,2008 (K.H. Smith, G.M. Zank, and M.A. Stutts).

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