



It's Time to Rethink "Kid Food" in America

09/12/2016 10:49 am ET

Ron Shaich Founder, chairman, CEO of Panera Bread. With 2,000 bakery-cafes, Panera serves 8 million people weekly and employs 100,000 associates.

When my son and daughter were born, my wife and I made their wellbeing our highest priority. We successfully gave them hugs and healthful foods in equal servings. But as our children grew, so did our frustration at our inability to fight against the gimmicky characters and endless toys that beckoned them from cereal boxes, kids' meals and myriad TV ads. Now, as a parent and a restaurateur, I'm taking action. And I'm urging the food industry to join me.

The time has come to rethink the food we serve our kids - all of it. The ubiquitous chicken nugget and French fry fare on kids' menus do not make for happy meals and the processed goods on supermarket shelves are no substitute for the fresh fruits and vegetables they too often replace. For proof of the harm we've done to our progeny look no further than childhood obesity rates, which have remained at 17 percent for more than a decade, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Certainly, the restaurant industry has played a part in creating this problem, and now we all need to be part of the solution. Since 2014, consumers have spent more money on food in away-from-home establishments than for meals prepared at home. That means restaurants have a direct influence on shaping

the future eating habits of our youngest guests. To my mind, it also means we have an increasing responsibility to do right by them.

I'm not talking baby steps. Too many of my competitors are making minimal adjustments to bask in the glow of favorable marketing. Last month, I saw a McDonald's commercial touting its newly preservative-free McNuggets. Well, they may have cleaned their chicken item up, but the dipping sauce remains laced with artificial additives. Is that true reform? Not in my book. I'm advocating comprehensive change and I'm genuinely trying to walk the talk.

Last month, Panera unveiled our Kids Meal Promise, vowing that by Sept. 7 the foods on our kids' meals would be clean, with no artificial flavors, preservatives, sweeteners or colors from artificial sources; worthy of trust, with no marketing gimmicks; full of delicious options, not just typical "kids food"; nutritiously paired with organic yogurt or side choices like an apple or sprouted grain roll; and without a sugary beverage included, making water the easiest choice.

In truth, Panera's kids' meals have purposely never mirrored the standard kids' meal, and we've never used cartoon characters, toys or toy-shaped foods to market those meals. When we introduced our Panera Kids menu 10 years ago, we offered smaller portions of our adult menu items without a sugary drink bundled in the mix. In the past two years, we've worked diligently to remove all artificial preservatives, artificial sweeteners, artificial flavors and colors from artificial sources from 100 percent of our food menu by the end of 2016. We are ahead on that commitment, and the food we serve our youngest patrons is no exception.

But we know we can still improve the nutritional composition of our kids' menu, and we are working on it. That does not mean we'll get rid of our mac and cheese. Instead, we balance indulgent items with healthful fare, like lean turkey sandwiches, giving our guests options that suit their dietary preferences. And we are focusing on the quality of our ingredients; the

absence of key artificial additives; and the addition of wholesome ingredients, like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. We urge other food purveyors to similarly rethink the foods they sell to kids.

Believe me, as a business leader, I appreciate the enormity of this request. After all, short-term sales and transactions may seem at risk. But I've always found that the surest path to long-term profits is by making the best interests of our guests our highest priority. I challenge my food industry peers to do likewise. Our children - and their parents - deserve better.