WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The government is increasingly trying to control what you can and cannot feed your children. In the name of improving children’s health, governments are banning toys in Happy Meals and considering numerous other regulations, taxes, and initiatives to limit how restaurants and other entities can market and prepare food. Yet studies show that these efforts are unlikely to improve children’s health.

Studies have failed to establish a clear link between fast food consumption and childhood obesity, or that government is effective in encouraging healthier eating. Toy bans are particularly bad policy since there is no evidence that they discourage people from purchasing fast food.

In fact, while there is little to suggest that government can micro-manage citizens into better shape, a growing body of empirical evidence suggests that parental involvement is key to improving the health of children. Several recent studies have shown that parental involvement—less television, family dinners, earlier bedtimes—is what keeps kids healthy.

Children need a strong parent who teaches the value of healthy eating, portion control, personal responsibility, and exercise. Unfortunately, by giving the government ever more responsibility for what children consume, policymakers are undermining parents and risk making our country less healthy.

Finally, government simply has no business dictating what Americans consume. Toy bans and other government attempts to control Americans’ food choices is paternalism at its worst and represent a loss of freedom that individuals and businesses shouldn’t tolerate.
WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Some assume government efforts to encourage healthy eating are harmless, but there are many reasons to support rolling back food regulations:

- **Raising Food Prices:** More government regulations mean higher costs for businesses and the food industry. And those costs are passed on to consumers.
- **Toy Bans Don’t Work:** Banning toys in Happy Meals won’t decrease demand. Kids don’t only want a Happy Meal for the toy; they want the food.
- **Basic Freedoms:** Parents, not the government, should decide how their kids eat. Government has no business in intervening in this basic, private aspect of life. Businesses should also be free to offer a wide-range of choices—including meals that come with toys for kids—to willing costumers.
- **Healthier Kids:** Last year, Ohio State University released a study showing children are at a lower risk for obesity if they eat a family dinner, get adequate sleep, and watch less television. All of these activities fall under the control of parents, not government. If we really want healthy kids, parents—not government—need to teach them about good food, proper portioning, and the importance of activity, exercise, and self-control. Policymakers should stop trying to parent from Washington and let the real moms and dads do their job!

MORE INFORMATION

**Banning Toys: The Latest Government Power Grab**

Starting in 2012, kids in San Francisco will no longer receive a toy in their McDonald’s Happy Meal. That’s because last year, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to ban toys in all fast food kid’s meals.

Last month, New York City councilman Leroy Comrie followed suit, announcing plans to introduce a bill banning toys in kids’ fast food meals. These regulations are nothing new in the Big Apple. New York City already bans trans-fats, and in 2008, the city began requiring fast-food restaurants to post calorie information.

Other cities have instituted similar regulations. Philadelphia and Seattle require restaurants to post calorie information, and last year, the Los Angeles City Council banned new construction of fast-food restaurants in certain neighborhoods. In Wellfleet, MA, residents voted to ban fast food restaurants within the city limits.

States are also getting in on the action. Illinois is about to institute a state-wide trans-fat ban. Numerous states try to encourage healthy eating by taxing certain products like soda and fattening food. For example, lawmakers in California are
considering taxes on soda, sports drinks and maybe even chocolate milk. Long standing soda taxes have been in place in West Virginia and Arkansas, yet those states rank among the fattest states in the United States—a clear sign that taxes on sugary drinks don’t impact weight levels.

Some want to make such bans national. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (a liberal food activist organization that promotes intrusive government food regulation) is suing McDonald’s in an effort to create a nationwide toy ban. The logic behind these toy bans is simple: Fast food restaurants use toys to lure children into their restaurants where they are fed unhealthy meals, and therefore government needs to step in to prevent these marketing techniques.

This logic is flawed on many levels, since there is no evidence that toy bans discourage people from purchasing fast food, that fast food consumption is linked to childhood obesity, or that government is effective in encouraging healthier eating.

Targeting Fast Food

Fast food restaurants have been targeted by the food nannies for years. The 2004 release of Morgan Spurlock’s documentary Super Size Me initiated a movement against fast food restaurants and a campaign to regulate their activities in the name of combating the so-called obesity epidemic.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) regularly targets fast food restaurants. In 1989, CSPI insisted fast food restaurants use oil that contained trans-fats instead of animal-based oils (lard) for frying. Today, the CSPI has reversed itself, now threatening to sue restaurants that use trans-fats. CSPI also joined one California mother in a lawsuit against McDonald’s Corporation, claiming that the company “exploits very young California children and harms their health by advertising unhealthy Happy Meals with toys directly to them.”

The mother, Monique Parham, explained the harrowing ordeal she faces saying no to her children’s demands for McDonald’s: “Needless to say, my answer was no, and as usual, pouting ensued and a little bit of a disagreement between us. This doesn’t stop with one request. It’s truly a litany of requests.”

Parham captures perfectly how the CSPI and other food regulation interest groups views parents: spineless, weak, and at the mercy of children and advertisers. They view parents as incapable of making sound decisions about when—and when not—to give their children a treat.

American parents everywhere should recoil from this kind of government paternalism.

Toy Bans Won’t Work

A popular refrain among public health advocates and policymakers is that eating fast food
causes obesity. As a result, policymakers across the country are developing new regulations on restaurants in an effort to fight obesity. Banning toys in fast food children’s meals is the latest obesity-busting scheme.

However, in a provocative study released last year, economists Michael L. Anderson of University of California, Berkeley, and David A. Matsa of Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management found no causal link between eating at fast food restaurants and obesity, and that most consumers of fast food simply offset calories from high-calorie restaurant meals by eating less at other times. Additionally, they found that obese customers don’t only eat high-calorie meals at restaurants; they eat more calories at home. In other words, obese people tend to eat more. Commenting on efforts to regulate the restaurant industry, Anderson and Matsa said “regulation targeting restaurants is unlikely to reduce obesity but could decrease consumer welfare.”

Other studies, such as two studies published in the International Journal of Obesity from 2004 and 2007, have echoed these findings.

Furthermore, there is no study that suggests that eliminating the toy for a Happy Meal will reduce the amount of fast food that parents purchase for their children. It seems logical that parents will continue to buy this food, which kids tend to like, regardless of whether they are able to buy a small plastic toy at the same time.

**Strong Parenting Is Key to Preventing Obesity in Children**

Obesity is a complex issue yet Washington bureaucrats are set on finding a magic bullet to solve America’s so called “obesity problems.” Determined to control what Americans eat, government is pushing a series of onerous regulations on restaurants, grocery stores, and food manufacturers.

But food regulations ignore the reality that food intake is only a portion of what determines a person’s weight. Genetics, race, sex and lifestyle choices all contribute to a person’s size as do eating habits and exercise. But none of these are the single deciding factors in a person’s weight.

For example, some people are naturally thin; they can eat more and manage to keep a stable and low weight. Others have to work very hard to maintain their weight through strict diet and rigorous exercise. The same is true for children. While some children are naturally thin, others put on weight easily and are naturally bigger.

Considering the many factors that impact a person’s weight, there isn’t one single policy prescription to solve the issue. However, there is some evidence that one thing makes a very big difference to the health of children: strong parenting.
Ohio State University conducted a major study in 2010 which found that only three things contribute to healthy children: sitting down for family dinners, getting more sleep at night and watching less television. Interestingly, these routines even worked for children at high risk of obesity (for reasons like having a family history of the condition, being raised in a low-income household or growing up in a single-parent home).

Other studies have yielded similar conclusions. A 2007 Northwestern University study found that inadequate sleep put children at higher risk of being overweight and that just one extra hour of sleep reduces the risk of being overweight in young children.

Most recently, an Australian study examined 165 overweight children and randomly assigned them to one of three programs: an exercise program, a parent-controlled diet program, or a program combining both diet and exercise. After two years, all children experienced weight loss but the report noted that “the greatest effects were achieved through inclusion of a parent-centered diet program, indicating the importance of targeting parents within treatment and the possibility of targeting them exclusively in treating obese prepubertal children.”

But these studies aren’t all new. In 2000, a Harvard Medical school study of over 16,000 children found that “eating family dinner was associated with healthful dietary intake patterns, including more fruits and vegetables, less fried food and soda, less saturated and trans fat, lower glycemic load, more fiber and micronutrients from food, and no material differences in red meat or snack foods.”

These studies suggest that the key to controlling childhood obesity really has little to do with government bans and regulations. Rather, the most important part of the solution is strong parenting.

---

**Fast Food Restaurants Are Answering to Consumer Demand**

Fast food restaurants are voluntarily altering their menus to give customers healthier choices. McDonald’s offers apple slices, yogurt and oatmeal on their menu. At Burger King, customers can order a veggie burger as well as a variety of salads. Most fast food restaurants offer lower-calorie grilled chicken sandwiches.

The entire fast food industry has been experimenting with oils devoid of trans-fats. Many already post calorie information—even directly on many of the food containers (this goes further than the regulation included in the new health care law, which requires only that calorie information be visible).

Consumers are also making healthier selections while still choosing a fast meal. This year, Subway sandwich shops surpassed McDonald’s in the number of locations nationwide. People are demanding healthier food and restaurant chains are responding—a clear sign that the market works and regulation isn’t necessary.
WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can help tell Washington to preserve food freedom!

- **Get Informed:** Get the facts. Visit:
  - The Independent Women’s Forum
    (www.iwf.org)
  - The Center for Consumer Freedom
    (www.consumerfreedom.com)
  - Keep Food Legal
    (www.keepfoodlegal.org)

- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what’s going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

- **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group of friends together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few committed people can change the world.

- **Remain Engaged Politically:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your national, state, and local leaders know your opinions!

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN’S FORUM

The Independent Women’s Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website www.iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

OUR PARTNERS

Contact us if you would like to become a partner!

CONNECT WITH IWF!
FOLLOW US ON:

SUPPORT IWF NOW!

To learn more about the Independent Women’s Forum, visit www.iwf.org