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Unhappy over meals

Lawsuit to ban toys with McDonald's kids' food raises parenting questions

By Emily Bryson York
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Monet Parham and her daughters had been getting along just fine with monthly visits to McDonald's, she said, until last summer's promotion for the movie "Shrek Forever After" encouraged kids to collect all of the toys.

Parham's oldest daughter Maya, age 6, was particularly keen on getting the Fiona doll but really wanted them all.

"I explained that the toys change every week," Parham said, to which her daughter suggested they go to the restaurant weekly. The real problem, she said, was her child's persistence.

"This doesn't stop with one request," she said. "It's truly a litany of requests."

Fed up, Parham became a plaintiff in the lawsuit filed Wednesday against Oak Brook-based McDonald's by the Center for Science in the Public Interest. The group, which seeks class-action status for its case, is asking California to ban all marketing of Happy Meal toys.

McDonald's has faced intense scrutiny from critics who believe the chain plays a significant role in the obesity epidemic. And in the last year, some special interest groups and others have focused their attacks on the fast-food chain's practice of marketing to

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children, who are too young to make responsible eating decisions but are good at clamoring for toys and burgers. These groups say children risk becoming obese and are learning unhealthy habits they'll carry for life.

Earlier this year the group Corporate Accountability International pushed McDonald's, unsuccessfully, to retire the Ronald McDonald character. And in California, McDonald's was the primary target when Santa Clara County and San Francisco passed laws that ban toys with kids' meals at fast-food restaurants when they fail to meet certain nutritional criteria.

With attacks proliferating, McDonald's has underscored that it offers more-nutritious options like apple slices as a substitute for fries, and defenders have argued that parents, not laws and lawsuits, should control what kids eat.

McDonald's spokeswoman Bridget Coffing said the company intends to "vigorously defend our brand, our reputation and our food." She added that, "parents consistently tell us they approve of our Happy Meals."

Parent Angela Richards of Rogers Park said she's not concerned about McDonald's ability to affect her 5-year-old son Jaisen. While there's a flood of fast-food marketing, she said "I feel like I control it because I pretty much control the TV-watching experience; anything he gets exposure to I try to control." After all, she said, "he's at that age where he's a sponge for everything he sees."

While "he wants to go to McDonald's every day," Richards said she takes him about once a week for a chicken nugget meal.

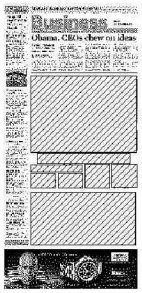
In recent years most major food purveyors have promised to limit advertising of high-fat foods to children and confine the use of popular entertainment properties like "Shrek" to better-for-you foods. Kraft, Kellogg, General Mills, McDonald's, Burger King and others have signed on to the Better Business Bureau's Children's Food And Beverage Advertising Initiative, which follows up on members' pledges. McDonald's, for example, only advertises the healthier Happy Meals, with white-meat chicken nuggets, apple dippers and low-fat milk.

According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest lawsuit, the fast-food industry, led by McDonald's, spent $520 million marketing children's meals in 2006.

Although Happy Meals probably aren't advisable as everyday fare, Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietician and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, said that "Happy Meals have come a long way" in recent years.

The problem is that most people don't order the healthy options, which "speaks to a much larger issue," she said.

"It isn't about one meal, one snack, this one week of your year, it's the whole diet," she said. "It's going to take restaurants offering healthy options, parents choosing the healthy options. It's going to take a village — all of us working



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together."

Margret Nickels, director of the Erikson Institute's Center for Children and Families, said children younger than 8 are more vulnerable to advertising.

While they understand concrete offers, such as a toy in exchange for a week of making their bed, "they don't understand more abstract and hidden forms of enticement," she said.

Nickels added that children aren't able to balance concerns about healthy food when they see a toy they want. This problem is compounded by the use of popular entertainment properties like "Madagascar," "Shrek," or "Ice Age."

"These themes really become part of their worlds," Nickels said. "It's not just some car but something with high, salient emotional value. They've watched whatever Disney movie and formed an emotional connection with a character."

This is what the Center for Science in the Public Interest alleges in its complaint, arguing that "when McDonald's bombards children with advertisements or other marketing for Happy Meals with toys, many children will pester their parents repeatedly to take them to McDonald's," and parents often make those extra trips.

However, Nickels suggested that this becomes an opportunity for parents rather than a matter for the legal system.

While Happy Meals can be a way to talk to kids about healthy eating, she said, "it's also as good as any opportunity for parent to help their child accept limits."

Parents may need to say, for instance, "No, we cannot have a fast-food dinner again because you had one last night," or "We don't do this more than once a week."

These conversations, she said, "support the child in learning to cope with limits and frustrations, and that is for many years part of the role of good, caring parents."

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Rashaun German, 3, of Chicago, eats a Happy Meal at the Navy Pier McDonald's on Wednesday. HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

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Toys tie in with pop culture

McDonald's often ties the free toys in its Happy Meals to current movies and other items already of interest to children. A recent selection includes:

▲ A combined Transformers/ Hello Kitty promotion is the current giveaway.

▲ "Star Wars: The Clone Wars," August 2008

▲ "Ice Age 2: Dawn of the Dinosaurs," June 2009

▲ Characters from many Pixar films including "Monsters Inc.," shown above, "The Incredibles" and the "Toy Story" franchise have been offered as toys.

◀ "Night at the Museum 2: Battle of the Smithsonian," May 2009

SOURCE: McDonald's

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A lawsuit filed Wednesday says the fast-food industry, led by McDonald's, spent $520 million marketing children's meals in 2006. **HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO**

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