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# Vermont Healthy Kids' Meals: Parents' Perspectives

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## Introduction

- **Childhood obesity has been increasing** for decades<sup>1</sup> and can be attributed to excess caloric intake driven by **large portions, restaurant foods, and availability of food.**<sup>2</sup>
- The options on children's menus in restaurants typically involve unhealthy choices such as fries, chicken fingers, and grilled cheese, with soda as the primary drink option.
- When healthy options are the default choice, children are more likely to eat them.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Though initially skeptical of modifications, restaurants will enact changes to maintain customer satisfaction and profits.<sup>5</sup>
- There is often **no significant difference in price** of healthier children's meals.<sup>6</sup>

## Methods

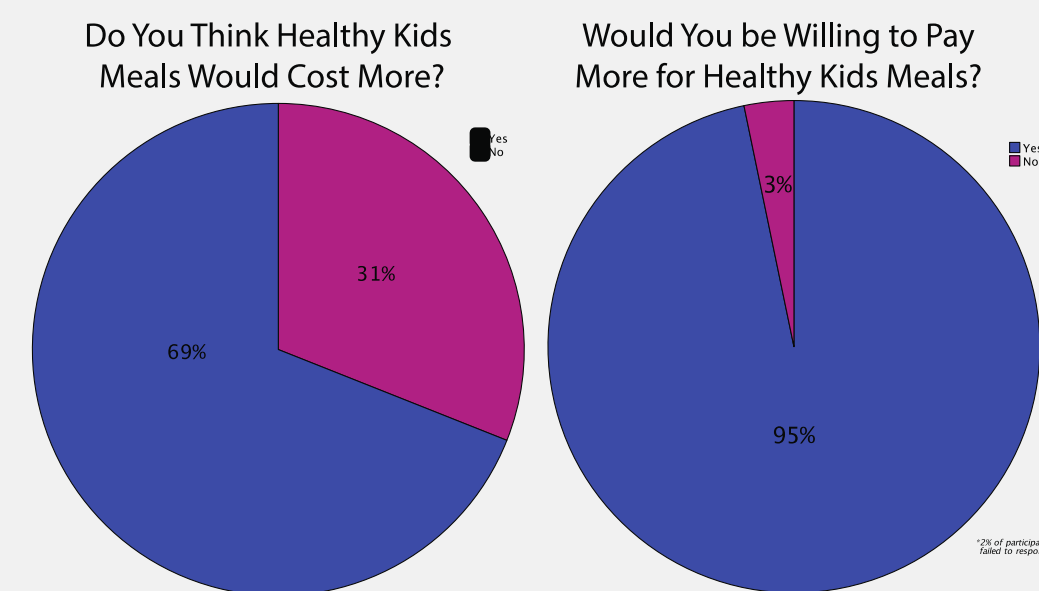
**187 paper and electronic surveys** were administered throughout the state of Vermont.

**13 multiple choice or yes/no questions** explored attitudes towards the availability, cost, and importance of healthy kids' meals.

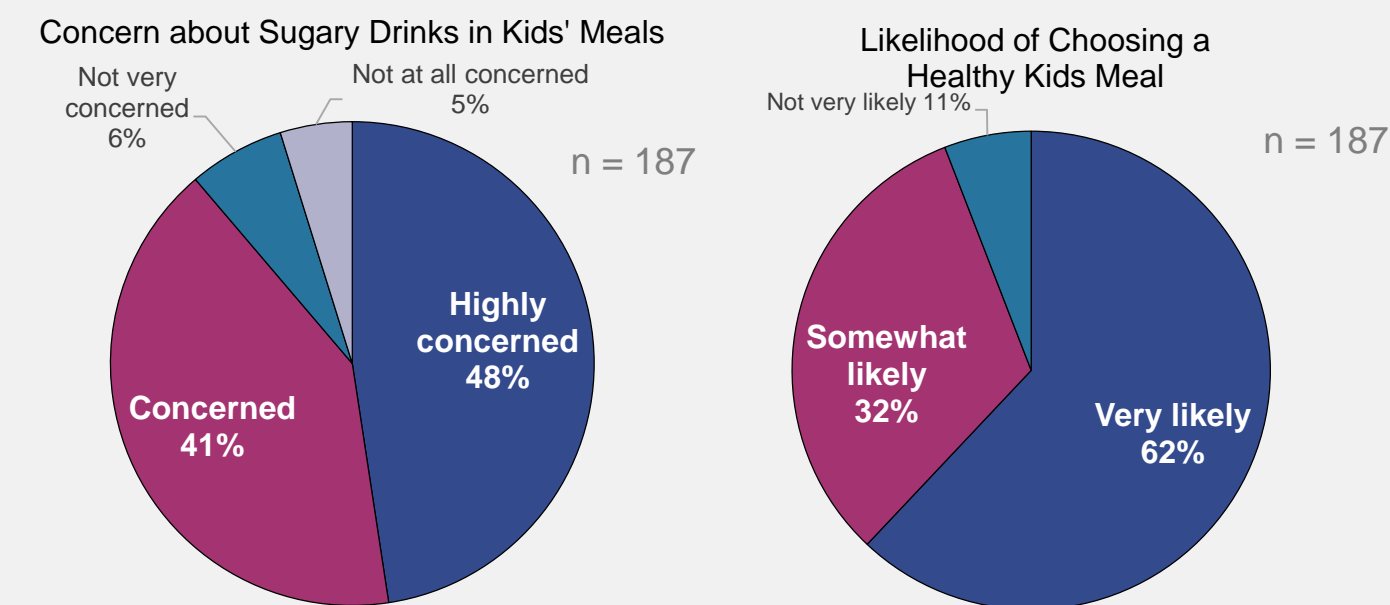
**3 demographic questions** assessed income, highest level of education, and number of children in the household.

**5 optional open-ended questions** sought parental suggestions and opinions not addressed by the previous questions.

## Results



**Figure 1.** 69% of parents surveyed believed that healthier food options at restaurants would cost more; however, **95% of parents polled were willing to pay more for healthier options.**

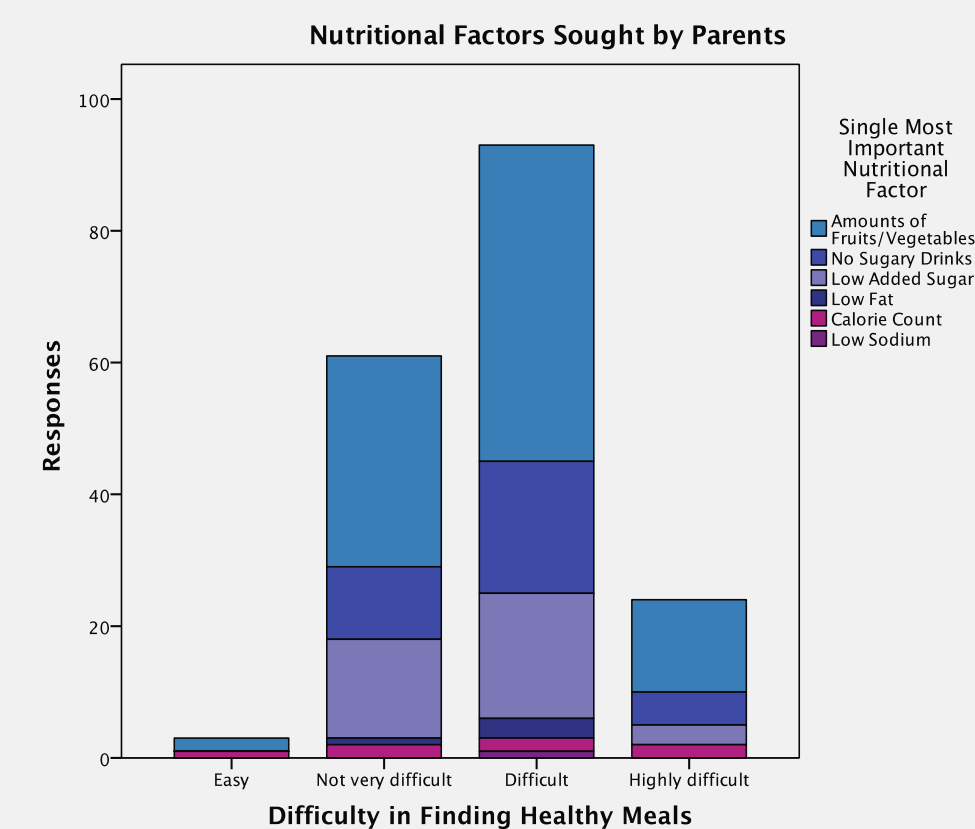


**Figure 2.** (left) **89% of parents reported feeling concerned or highly concerned** about the inclusion of sugary drinks in kids meals; (right) **62% of parents were very likely to choose the healthier food option** at a restaurant.



Choice	Chi-square	df	Sig.
Healthy Food Availability and Convenience			
Healthy Food Availability and Cost			

... significant at the 0.05 level.



**Figure 3.** (above) Single most important nutritional factor sought by parents who self reported the level of difficulty in finding nutritional meals for their children while dining out. **The majority of parents who reported difficulty in finding healthy meals felt the amount of fruits/vegetables was the single most important nutritional factor.**

**Figure 4.** (left) Percent of parents that ranked the single most important factor when choosing a restaurant by annual family income. Chi-squared analysis (below left) of family above or below Vermont mean income showed **low income Vermonters were more concerned about cost than healthy food as compared to high income Vermonters.**

## What Parents are Saying

What **don't** you want to see in kids' meals?

"Added sugar, sodium, high fructose corn syrup, added chemicals."

"Soda, fried food, coloured food, sugar."

"GMOs, preservatives, fructose syrup, pesticides, sugar."

What **do** you want to see in kids' meals?

"Veggies, fruits, milk, a mini size of normal adult foods like fish, meat, etc."

"Fresh fruits and veggies, and a nice range of options."

## Discussion

- The majority of parents are concerned about kids' meal nutrition and would be likely to purchase healthier options over current options, even at increased prices.
- For lower income Vermonters, cost does remain a concern. If restaurants enact changes to the kids' menu, prices should remain the same, if not lower, to ensure that families of all socioeconomic classes will be likely to purchase healthier meals.
- Priority modifications to meals should include increased amounts of fruits and vegetables and elimination of added sugar.

Lessons learned:

- Parents have differing opinions on what a "healthy" meal constitutes.
- Physicians need to consider **access** to healthy food as a potential source of stress and poor health outcomes in patients.