

Fundamental Challenges To Kids' Consumption Of Fruits And Vegetables

BY JIM PREVOR, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PRODUCE BUSINESS

It is often pointed out that what people say they want and what they actually purchase and/or consume can differ greatly. Rarely is that more true than when you ask parents about food for their own children.

It is not surprising that parents would report home eating is healthiest for children; it actually is healthiest for everyone. After all, Mom can control portion size, and she can control assortment.

Vegetables in school foodservice or restaurants are offered, but if your kid doesn't like squash sautéed in tomato sauce, then it is unlikely to be consumed. A mom can know that Johnny likes green beans, carrots, peas and Spaghetti squash, and include one of these on the menu every day.

We know from credible data we have on baby food and milk that many a parent who will do without organic for themselves will ante up to ensure their children have what they perceive to be the best.

So there is good reason to think that effective marketing tied to "clean" and "healthy" will lead parents to pay more for the "best" fruits and vegetables, which creates some marketing opportunity.

Certainly, those families that come from regions or belong to ethnicities that have diets rich in fruits and vegetables are going to naturally have diets that are more produce-dense.

Of course, moms have always urged their children to eat more fruits and vegetables. So how much change this represents and how much it means produce consumption can be increased is unclear.

There are fundamental challenges that make increasing produce consumption among kids difficult. Most notably, it is one thing to boost consumption of sweet snack fruit, since kids typically enjoy fruit, so feeding them fruit can be done with increased availability. However, many of the most nutrient-dense produce items are bitter and less appealing to a child's palate.

And many industry efforts to boost

When it comes to produce industry efforts to boost consumption, maybe the focus has to be on making the healthiest produce items taste better.

consumption among kids, such as efforts to use cartoons or puppet characters to attract children to fruits and vegetables, have not been shown to increase consumption.

Fundamentally, whatever parents may like to buy, children are not generally feeling their mortality, so they want to eat foods that taste good. When it comes to produce industry efforts to boost consumption, maybe the focus has to be on making the healthiest produce items taste better.

School foodservice seems like an opportunity, but it turns out that compelling school foodservice operations to serve more produce is a lot easier than compelling children to eat more produce.

In the school attended by this author's children, each student was required to accept a vegetable on his or her plate. After a few months in which the garbage pails were filled with discarded vegetables, the school abandoned the effort.

Even things that excite the produce industry may not actually be beneficial in the long run. The industry loves salad bars in schools, because the minute a school opens one, the industry starts receiving orders for produce items that had never been purchased by the school.

There is also real fear that children, not being experts in salad composition, may turn themselves off consuming salad items because adding salad bar items on their plate may cause digestive problems. Maybe offering composed salads on a long-term basis would serve to boost consumption.

Restaurants have been chastised for not offering children healthy options in kid's meals, and many establishments have responded. McDonald's has Cuties; Disney

made the default option baby carrots, grapes and apple slices.

At Darden restaurants, there is a commitment to make fruit and vegetables the default side dish, 1 percent milk is promoted, and at least one children's menu option must meet specific criteria regarding calories, sodium and fat.

Offering juice instead of soda may feel healthier, but the truth is many juice drinks have more sugar than Coca-Cola.

There are many restaurants trumpeting new offerings, but very few announced the improvements these healthier offerings caused in leading children to have healthier diets.

In addition, the science on health and nutrition is changing and unsettled. Not very long ago, expert opinion was that the big problem with French fries was the frying. Now the same experts tell us the oil is the best part. They worry about the glycemic load of the potato itself. So it is not always clear what a healthy option means.

Intuitively, it seems smart to focus on changing dietary habits of children to be more produce-dense. This, it is thought, will increase the likelihood that children will continue to eat more fruits and vegetables as they move into adulthood — although the evidence for this is still unconfirmed.

We don't really know what will work. Is this primarily a marketing problem? A culinary problem? Or is it something inherent in the product?

With increased travel, global media and a more ethnically diverse society, there is little question that there is a world of dishes waiting to be discovered by children, and we would be foolish to not try all we can.