

Encounters with Child's Meal Toys: Observations of Parents' and Children's Precautionary Behaviors

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Abstract. This study focused on the effectiveness of warnings on fast-food promotional toys. Fast-food restaurants use a variety of sales gimmicks to increase sales and enhance customer loyalty. A popular sales approach is to give free toys to customers who purchase a child's meal. This study was a preliminary examination of parents' and children's precautions when using child's meal toys. Sixty naturalistic observations were conducted in four popular restaurant chains. Seventy-two percent of the fast food warnings were thrown away without being read. Most of the children retrieved the toy on their own, indicating very little supervision by parents. Recommendations relevant to child's meal toy design and warning effectiveness are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Children's toys serve many purposes, including support for learning through play, reinforcement to modify behavior, and engaging in play with others. Toys are also used by parents to encourage children to eat and display appropriate behaviors at mealtime. Cipani (1999) found that non-compliance (i.e., not eating food, not obeying rules) and displaying inappropriate behaviors when dining out were two of six problem behaviors frequently reported by parents. Researchers have recommended the use of toys to provide contingencies to prevent food refusal or eliminate mealtime problem behaviors (Gorolami and Scotti, 2001; Kerwin, Ahearn, Eicher, and Burd, 1995). Because of their reinforcement value, toys have maintained a highly positive position in many societies. However, toys can also introduce hazards. In a survey conducted by Huber, Marchand-Martella, Martella, and Wood (1996), inappropriate use of toys or materials was ranked as one of the major contributors to accidents and injuries among children in both preschool and school-age children.

Every year, fast-food restaurant sales account for nearly one-third of the total out-of-home meals (National Restaurant Association, 2002). Fast-food restaurants strive to develop and market the best toy to include with a child's meal to win customers. Children are highly vulnerable to the marketing strategies used by fast-food restaurants. "Even 2 year-olds are able to recognize brands and identify them. By age 3, the average American child recognizes about 100 brand logos (Pugh, 2001)." Fast-food restaurants will use this to their advantage by designing toys after recognizable themes and

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characters. When parents and children receive the latest advertised toy, potential hazards are not typically a consideration.

Many toys are also linked to the latest popular movie, which has likely been highly advertised, and consequently, increases the desirability of the toy. Popular toys can increase customers by 30%. (Pugh, 2001) Parents may be influenced by their children when choosing a restaurant based on the toys that are included with the child's meal. Parents may also be vulnerable because everything is conveniently packaged in a child's meal.

Each year, such restaurant chains as McDonalds and Burger King will spend \$4 billion on toy giveaways (Kennedy, 2001). Despite the increases in profits, there have been several disadvantages of these giveaways. Burger King has recalled nearly 3 million toys in 2001. All of the toys that were recalled were intended for children under the age of 3 with the words "Toddler Toys For Kids Under Three Years Old" printed on the packaging (CPSC, 2001). Since 1999, 33 million toys have been recalled (Kennedy, 2001). The Consumer Product Safety Commission has repeatedly exposed and identified the hazards of many fast-food toys. Fast-food restaurants are highly aware of the sales generated by their giveaway toys, while parents may not be aware of the risks associated with these toys. News reports reveal the frequency of injuries experienced by children using child's meal toys as well as the recall of these toys. However, after a toy has been distributed, there is no guarantee it will ever be returned once recalled.

Fast-food restaurants should take a more proactive approach when designing their toys and the toy packaging. First and foremost, the hazards should be designed out. Appropriate warnings should be clearly visible on the product (toy). Studies have shown that people decide whether or not toys are suitable simply by physically examining the product and not because of the warnings on the product (Davies, et al., 1998). Warnings on child's meal toys are typically presented on the packaging. Figure 1 illustrates the packaging in a child's meal toy acquired from a well-known fast-food chain. The packaging used for this toy was clear with black lettering. Lettering was also on both sides of the package. The first picture shows packaging as it would normally appear. The second picture is of the packaging with an insert to make the sides readable. The warning on this packaging is located in the lower left corner. While the packaging is in its normal state, the warning is obscured by the print on the other side. It should also be noted that the warning font and placement is less apparent than the advertisements on the packaging.

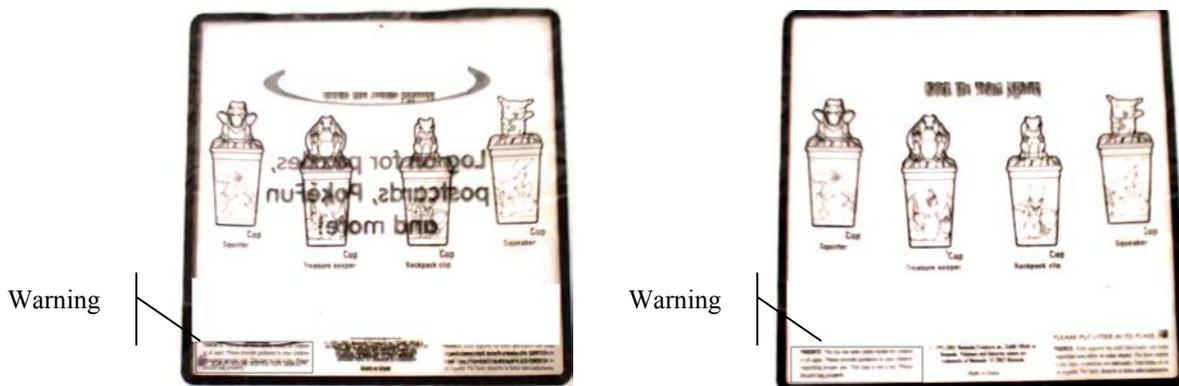


Figure 1: Left: Typical/normal presentation of packaging from a child's meal toy. Right: Enhanced visibility of the same information using an insert

Another tactic used on the packaging is the color of the packaging material and the color of the print on the packaging. Such color combinations as dark purple packaging with black ink or light blue packaging with white ink decreases readability. Thus, there are several issues to be addressed to identify and reduce the hazards associated with child's meal toys.

The purpose of this study was to identify whether parents and children attend to warnings on fast-food promotional toys, and to explore other factors that might influence the degree of attention given to a warning, as well as the use of the product. This study was a naturalistic observation.

METHOD

Participants

Sixty observations were made in four different fast-food restaurants. To be recorded, an observation had to include at least one parent and child who purchased a fast-food meal with a toy included.

Procedure

Once the observation criterion was met, the following demographic information was recorded: number of children, number of adults, estimated age(s) of children and adults. Several behavior patterns with preset alternatives were also recorded. The behavior patterns and alternatives were posed in the form of questions to be answered by the observer (Table 1).

Table 1: Behavior patterns and selection alternatives

Behavior Pattern	Alternatives
How is the toy given to the child?	Given by parent OR Child retrieves toy.
How is the toy opened?	Opened by parent OR Child opens toy.
Is the warning read?	YES OR NO
Is the toy developmentally appropriate (based upon estimated age of child).	YES OR NO
What was done with the warning?	Read, then thrown away OR Read then kept with toy OR Briefly looked at then thrown away OR Briefly looked at then kept with toy OR Thrown away

RESULTS

The estimated average age of the children observed was 5 years old, while the estimated average age of the adults was 32 years old. In more than half of the observations, the children retrieved and opened the toy. All of the fast-food restaurants in this study had the warning printed on the packaging. However, 72% of fast-food warnings were not looked at before being thrown away. Ten percent of toys given to the children were developmentally inappropriate for the approximated ages of the children.

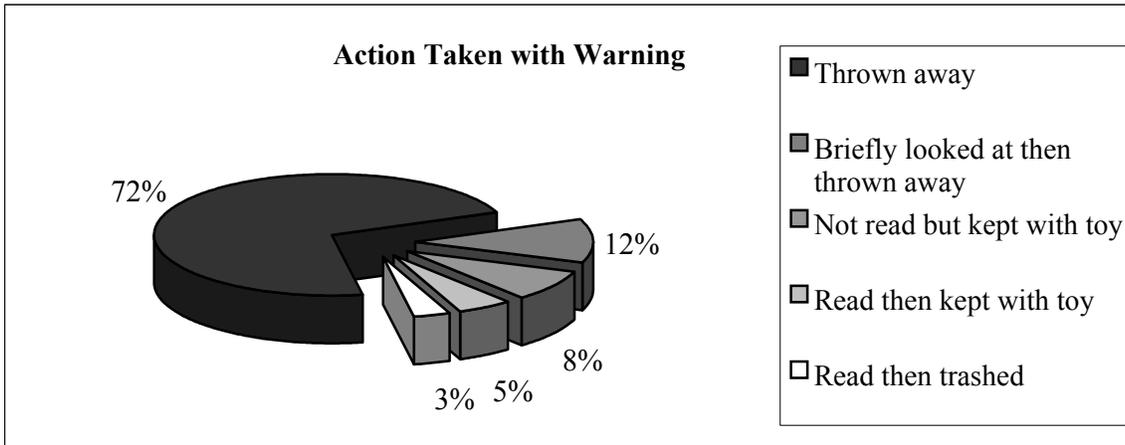


Figure 2: Percentages illustrating actions taken with the warnings on the child's meal toys

A load grouping was created by summing the number of children present in each observation, regardless of the number of parents. The load variable was then dichotomized such that parents with 1 or 2 children were assigned to the "low load" group and parents with more than 2 children were assigned to the "high load" group. Several 2 X 2 Chi-square analyses were conducted on the observed behaviors (see Table 1) to identify associations. None of the analyses revealed any significant differences in parental behaviors based upon load (number of children). A second series of 2 X 2 Chi-square analyses were conducted using number of adults present as a factor. Single parent situations were assigned to one group while dual parent or 2-adult situations were assigned to a separate group. None of the analyses revealed any significant differences in parental behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

With over half of the children in this observational study retrieving the toy from the bag, very little supervision focused on preventing hazards introduced by child's meal toys is being provided. An overwhelming majority of the packaging containing the warnings was thrown away. Once the packaging has been thrown away, there is no warning left with the toy. Parents should have the right to be warned of the toy hazards during the entire life cycle of the toy, not just at the time of purchase. Once we understand which warning approach works best, the warnings should be imprinted on the product.

One purpose of eating at a fast-food restaurant is the need to save time; parents may overlook details while focusing more on the time. An even more hazardous situation is the use of the drive-through windows at fast food restaurants. Because of this context, parents may be less likely to read the warnings when ordering food at a drive through than when actually entering and eating in the restaurant. When parents are driving, it is more difficult for them to assist their children and they are unable to react as quickly.

Many countries are working to standardize safety and performance requirements for children's toys (Krische, 1997). These efforts should be combined with research in risk communications and education. Several warning design principles have been derived from empirical research and can be placed on the actual product, rather than solely on the packaging.

Future research should explore warning effectiveness by empirically testing factors such as warning design and location, as well as content. There is obviously a need for improvements to the child's meal toy. First, the hazard should be completely eliminated from the design. Designers also need to understand that the mere presence of warnings isn't enough. The warning must be effective, which means that it must be designed in such a way that they capture attention, communicate the hazard, and communicate the consequences.

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