



What Will Bring Families Back to Restaurants?

4 Min Read | 8.21.2020 | By Jennifer Loper

Why isn't it over yet? When can things go back to how they used to be? Like a kid kicking their feet in the backseat wondering whether we're there yet, these are the questions on so many minds as we all struggle to find our footing in a world impacted by COVID-19. Now that summer has come and some states have begun opening up, many people are feeling braver and more willing to venture out in search of normalcy—families included. What are they looking for when they go back to eat at a restaurant for the first time? How are they feeling? And what are their expectations of restaurants?

C3 looked to answer those questions and others when we surveyed over 500 parents with young kids (ages 4-10) during the third week of June 2020. Even though a lot has already changed since June, looking at parents' behaviors and attitudes during that time reveals what is important to them—and what will keep being important to them—as they bring their families back to restaurants.

“Kid-friendliness is key for bringing families back to restaurants.”

One key finding: restaurants that create a kid-friendly experience will make parents feel safer and more excited about taking their kids out to eat. Read on to see what else they had to tell us about going out to eat in these unprecedented times.

A Mix of Excitement and Anxiety

As families tentatively return to restaurant dining rooms, they're filled with excitement, worry, and high expectations.

More than half of the parents we surveyed are willing to dine indoors at restaurants with their kids in the next month. In fact, by late June, a quarter had already done so. The other half of parents remain hesitant, a percentage that may grow again in the coming weeks as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise across the US.

Parents' mixed attitudes about taking their kids into restaurants are mirrored in the emotions they feel about the prospect: The top five emotions parents report feeling when thinking of taking their kids out to eat are: excitement, anxiety, worry, joy, and hope.

Keeping Kids Safe

It's no surprise that parents have high expectations of safety and sanitation procedures at restaurants. The parents we surveyed want to see clearly visible steps taken to reduce risk, including free hand sanitizer at entrances, sanitation of tables/chairs between customers, employees wearing masks and gloves, spaced out tables, and daily employee temperature checks.

They also have expectations of safety procedures that relate specifically to kids. Over half of parents surveyed expect play areas to be closed, or at the absolute least, sanitized more frequently; two-thirds expect sanitation of high chairs & booster seats between customers; and they expect kids' toys, cups, crayons, and activity menus to be single use or individually wrapped.

Now is not the time to walk away from kid-friendly items like toys, cups, crayons, and activity menus. These items are now more important than ever in restaurants because, as parents told us, they feel better knowing that there's entertainment to help keep kids safe at the table.

“The top five emotions parents report feeling when thinking of taking their kids out to eat are: excitement, anxiety, worry, joy, and hope.”

Kid-Friendly = More Motivating

Not only is kid-friendliness important for families to feel safe, it's also what will get them excited about going out to eat.

In fact, it's the number one thing—by far—that parents say will make them choose one restaurant over another once they're ready to take their kids out to eat. The parents we surveyed said kid-friendliness is even more important than the food.

Of the 22 options we gave them, here are the top six things that parents will look for in restaurants when they're deciding where to dine out with their kids again. This list shows parents are putting a lot of emphasis on what will give their kids a good experience.

1. They're kid-friendly (57 percent)
2. They have my favorite food / food I'm craving (49 percent)
3. They have my kids' favorite food / food they're craving (46 percent)
4. I trust their sanitation and safety procedures (45 percent)
5. They provide fun and safe things to entertain my kids while we're in the restaurant (43 percent)
6. My kids request to go there (40 percent)

What do these parents mean when they say “kid-friendly?”

“Activities at the table, even just the typical menu and crayons is good,” said one respondent. “I went to one recently that didn't have a kid's menu or crayons given out and my daughter kept asking for them. We finally found a receipt paper and a pen.” “Puzzles and other fun activities,” specified another. A third clarified: “A very child-friendly place will have waiters who actually like kids.”

In other words, being kid-friendly starts with giving kids activities that they'll love, but it's also about creating an experience that tells kids and families that this is a place for them. There are so many creative ways to make families feel welcome, and now's the time to invest and innovate in this space to make sure your restaurant is a top choice for families.

Families' High Expectations

At the end of the day, parents are still looking to restaurants to give their families a great dining experience, one that includes all the things that make going out to eat extra special for their kids. And for 73 percent of the parents we surveyed, that expectation of a great dining experience is just not the same as it was pre-COVID—it's even higher now.

Why? Because, in this environment, parents feel that if they are going to take the risk of taking their kids out to eat at a restaurant, they want that risk to be worthwhile.

In conclusion, many families are ready (or almost ready!) to start coming back into restaurants to eat, and though they're craving a comfortable and familiar experience, they know that some things will need to be different. They're keeping an eye out for the ways brands are striving to keep them safe, healthy, and entertained, and they want their choices to be worth it—not just to them, but to their kids. There is a unique opportunity here not to walk away from things that add to the experience, but to lean into the realities of 2020 and invest in strategies to keep families choosing to come back.

But time moves strangely during a pandemic. By the time you read this, the situation may have changed drastically again ... though the things families want and need likely haven't.

“Parents feel that if they are going to take the risk of taking their kids out to eat at a restaurant, they want that risk to be worthwhile.”



Jennifer Loper

@c3lab | LinkedIn | Website

Jennifer Loper is the president of C3 Brand Marketing. She started back in 2006 as an account manager and has risen to her presidential role not only through her kind and unwavering leadership of the account management department, but also a talent bordering on super-powerful for building meaningful, lasting relationships with clients that truly see C3 as partners. C3 is known for building fully custom family and kids' programs for its partners—from strategy and brand positioning, to experiential design, to designing and producing product and getting it where it needs to go.