

Story



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New Data: Kids Are Driving Loyalty at Beverage-Focused Chains



Small kid-friendly touches can have an outsized impact.

From quick coffee runs to smoothie breaks, beverage-focused restaurants are woven into everyday routines. What was once a singular grab-and-go experience for an adult is rapidly evolving into a shared family ritual. Increasingly, parents are bringing their kids along, and expecting more than just adult-oriented menus.

Our recent C3 survey of parents with children ages 3–10 confirms that chains like Scooter’s, Tropical Smoothie Cafe, Dutch Bros, Swig, and Starbucks are becoming family destinations.

Parents told us these brands are not just about caffeine. They are about shared experiences, convenience, and making kids feel included.

Why the Family Segment Matters

We surveyed parents who are consistent visitors to beverage-focused chains, and a majority said they’ve brought their kids to beverage-focused restaurants in the past six months. Most parents also purchase an item specifically for their children during these visits, creating highly valuable incremental sales that significantly boost the average transaction value.

Parents note their favorite brands stand out for friendliness, customization, and special treats like smoothies, hot chocolate, cake pops, or even “dirty sodas” topped with candy.

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When kids enjoy the visit and feel valued as customers, parents are more likely to return. The family experience becomes a loyalty driver.

Opportunities to Be Even More Kid-Friendly

When asked what would make beverage chains more kid-friendly, parents offered consistent, actionable insights.

The top requests centered on kid-specific drink options that are smaller, reliably caffeine-free, and highly customizable. There is also a strong demand for nutritious yet fun options, such as lower-sugar smoothies, fruit-based treats, and healthy, natural ingredient snacks.

Parents consistently pointed to the need for spill prevention, specifically recommending durable, spill-proof kids’ cups to make car rides and cafe stops less stressful. Just as important is the warm, welcoming service. Staff who make eye contact and engage with children, treating them like genuine customers rather than just focusing on the adult, create a lasting, positive impression that drives repeat visits.

Finally, parents care about affordable value such as discounts, kids’ deals, and special pricing. Simple acts of engagement like entertainment touches (e.g., coloring pages, themed cup designs) can turn waiting time into bonding time.

Spotlight on Toys: A Proven Loyalty Magnet

We tested one concept directly: What if beverage chains offered free kids’ toys or giveaways with every child’s beverage or snack?

The response was overwhelming: a whopping 93 percent of parents love or like the idea. Parents emphasized how much joy a small toy brings, noting that it makes kids happy and immediately keeps them engaged, turning a potentially stressful moment into a smoother, more enjoyable experience for the parent. Furthermore, receiving something unexpected makes kids feel special, rewarded, and valued, transforming the entire visit into a prized treat.

Many parents openly admitted that the incentive of a toy would directly encourage repeat visits, sparking requests from children for return trips. Furthermore, this taps into the nostalgia factor, with some parents reflecting on their own positive childhood memories of collecting kids’ meal toys and welcoming that idea for their kids.

The survey data confirms the power of offering free toys or giveaways. An overwhelming 96% of parents agreed that this concept would make their children more excited about visiting the brand, while 93 percent felt it would make the brand itself seem more fun. A significant majority—88 percent of parents—agreed that a toy incentive would make them more likely to take their kids there more often, establishing the brand as a better overall value for their family.

The Takeaway for Brands

The message is clear: small kid-friendly touches can have an outsized impact. Free toys or giveaways add excitement. Healthier and fun options make parents feel good. Affordable pricing and engaging service seal the deal.

Just as collectibles have boosted brand love for QSRs, kid-focused offerings can transform beverage chains into family loyalty hubs. By listening to parents—and delighting kids—these brands can secure a stronger place in everyday family routines.

Jennifer Loper is the president of C3. C3 has over 37 years of experience in creating, manufacturing and distributing collectible products as part of meal programs. The team of experts can help brands launch tangible activations that not only appeal to target consumers but also reflect and amplify the brand’s unique personality. By partnering with C3, brands can unlock the full potential of collectible promotions, driving repeat visits, fostering brand loyalty and creating lasting emotional connections with customers of all ages.