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Work & Family

By Sue Shellenbarger

Working Parents Hunger For Help in the Kitchen

DOES IT PAY to market new products to frazzled working parents?

Yes, if microwave meals for kids are any guide.

Sales of frozen individual dinners for children, including Kid Cuisine by ConAgra and Looney Tunes by Tyson Foods, have risen 15% from a year ago. My Own Meals and Geo. A. Hormel are rolling out shelf-stable entries as well. The product category "is doing very well," says Martin Friedman of New Product News.

Working parents need help in the kitchen, says My Own Meals' Mary Anne Jackson, Deerfield, Ill., who introduced a line of kids' meals in 1986. As a working mom, she says, "I feel guilty that my kids may not be getting the same meal my mom served me."

Though none of the marketers recommend that kids heat the meals alone, some have heat-resistant handles so a child can lift them safely from the microwave.

Pitches for some of the products strike a nerve. Family Affairs, a periodical of the Institute for American Values, a think tank on family issues, was flooded with letters after it quoted a ConAgra unit's 1989 news release: "What's a kid to do when he finally gets home from a rocky afternoon at day care? . . . Quick, mom, pop a complete, nutritious frozen dinner in the microwave."

The idea that a child needs to be indulged with an individual meal because he or she has been in day care brought protests from Nina Shapiro-Perl, a Washington, D.C., video producer and mother. "It's not so much the food I'm worried about," she says. "It's just the values I don't want my children to swallow."

But for many parents, pragmatism prevails. "At least the kids are getting something good to eat," Mr. Friedman says.