



Childhood Obesity ... Too Much Food for Thought?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises childhood obesity as one of the most serious global challenges for the 21st Century. According to Food for Fitness expert and author of Go Faster Food for Kids, Kate Percy, we're in for the long haul in the fight to reduce our children's waistlines.

Britain has one of the fastest-rising obesity rates in the developed world. Over the past 20 years, the proportion of obese children in England has doubled. In some areas, children are even more obese than adults, like in Westminster, where the percentage of obese children aged 11 or under is a staggering 28%! It doesn't take a genius to recognise that our overfed lifestyles are condemning our children to a dismal future; medically, psychologically and economically. According to Tam Fry, of the National Obesity Forum, children who are obese at the age of ten, and still obese at the age of 25, treble their chance of an early death.

Some good news! The National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP), which measures the height and weight of around one million school children in England every year, found that although there's been a steady rise in childhood obesity since 1995, this has levelled since 2011. That said, the latest count from 2012/13 found that 18.9% of 10-11 yr olds were obese, and a further 14.4% overweight.

Welcome to 21st century life...

Mike and Clare live in Bristol. Both overweight, Mike has just been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, whilst Clare is about to have a knee replacement. Their son, Jack*, 16, who with a BMI of 30 is classed as obese, spends his leisure hours alone in his room, gaming. He doesn't 'do sport', and generally skips breakfast at home, preferring to buy an energy drink and a pastry en route to school. The growth in obesity correlates perfectly with the modernisation of our world over the past 20 years. We are so clever! We've created technology to carry out pretty much every mundane task; machines to do our washing, cars to drive us to work and school, computers to do our shopping. The result? We spend too much time sitting. And that's what we're allowing our children to do. For hours on end, completely immobile, in front of the screen; gaming, social media ... even homework.

We eat differently now, too. The food industry has seduced us, manipulating our taste buds with processed foods high in sugar, saturated fats and salt. For many, the classic 'meat and two veg' eaten at table has been replaced by uncontrolled eating throughout the day. Cooking from scratch is TV entertainment; children no longer learn basic cookery skills at their mother's knee. In a 2011 study by Cancer Research of the diets of 2635 11-16 year olds in England and Wales, 6% had eaten no fresh fruit or vegetables in the past seven days! What's more, we're surrounded by temptation. Calories on tap wherever we go. The grotty British Rail cafe at the station a distant memory, we're now treated to an international feast; sushi, French patisseries, burgers or bagels!

Overweight has become 'the norm'. And we're adapting to fit our new proportions, super-sizing to satisfy our expanding bellies. We're even making buggies to accommodate bigger kids. Why, then, for a country so concerned about children's welfare, are we allowing our children to eat their way to self-destruction? We can't, and don't want to, turn back the clock, but we can influence the future.

Fitness professionals may assume the answer is obvious; eat less, move more. If it were only that simple! Our Jack won't have the motivation to change his lifestyle without education, encouragement, and most importantly, support, from all levels of society.

Tough times, tough measures ... In 2012, France introduced taxation on drinks with added sugar and artificial sweeteners. No one likes 'big-brother' intervention, but is it time for the government to follow the lead with tougher measures such as health warnings and taxation on foods and drinks high in sugar, salt and saturated fat, and greater regulation on the promotion of junk foods targeted at children?

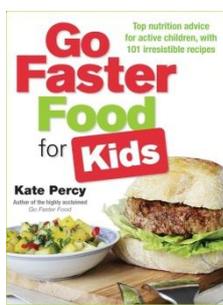
Get kids on message. Get kids excited about food early on, they'll quickly understand how eating different foods affects how they perform and feel. That childhood obesity figures have stabilised since 2011 is perhaps proof that educational initiatives such as the National Healthy Schools programme are making an impact. With the introduction of healthy eating into the school curriculum from September 2014, things can only get better. From my own experience of running workshops with BBC Learning and in primary schools, simple methods like using well-known sports personalities as role models helps children connect with the food they eat. If a star like Jessica Ennis-Hill eats fruit for breakfast, what better incentive for them to do the same? Through local and national initiatives, kids are now getting engaged with food, learning that healthy can also be delicious, through planting their own vegetable plots, keeping chickens, and discovering the delights of tasting and cooking with fresh ingredients.

Fit for life. Whilst anti-obesity measures focus principally on diet, sustained weight management cannot be achieved while our children remain sedentary. Once we can encourage our Jack to get physically active, then fitness, weight loss, self-esteem and long term health will naturally follow. We just need to get him active in the first place. Even small steps, such as losing 3% body weight can, if maintained, represent a significant reduction in future obesity-related health problems. According to Prof Hermann Toplak, President-elect of the European Association for the Study of Obesity, "... all the technology around us, has led to physical inactivity on all levels...children and adults are not building up enough functioning muscle mass". Investment in sport, official recommendations on physical activity, initiatives such as ukactive's "Start Young, Stay Active" are getting children moving across the UK. We need to see more investment in the promotion and provision of physical activity at grass roots level, however, such as GP referrals to free programmes at local sports centres for overweight children.

Cruel to be kind. As a mother, I admit it's often hard to give an outright "NO!". But the ultimate responsibility for a child's lifestyle lies with the parent(s). Kids are naturally active; they just need a little encouragement sometimes! Taking control isn't all about tough love, however, it's also about having fun, going out for walks, skipping in the yard, preparing and shopping for food and cooking together.

Public Health England's Professor John Newton rightly points out, "Obesity is a complex issue that requires action at national, local, family and individual level; everyone has a role to play...". Overweight children are likely to have overweight parents, so getting the likes of Jack onto the right path will need more than a few government health warnings! He'll need education, time, commitment and support from others to find the motivation to change. No quick-fix solution, but hopefully current efforts will eventually filter through to where they are needed the most.

*Mike, Clare and Jack are fictional



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