

fairfield

MAGAZINE

A Season
Full of Treats:
artisanal breads,
beaujolais nouveau,
food for our children

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...so you'll grow big and strong

written by Lynn Prowitt-Smith
photography by Peter Baker



in affluent areas like Fairfield, kids generally lack for nothing. But what they eat—and don't eat—may be setting the stage for health problems down the road. We're on a slippery slope, with at least 30 percent of kids ages 6 to 19 overweight, and some estimates saying that nearly half of the children in North America could be overweight by 2010.

"The problem is more prevalent in the inner city, but evident everywhere," says Judy Hochstadt, MD, of Pediatric Healthcare Associates in Southport, a Yale-trained pediatrician and pediatric endocrinologist who has been in practice for 25 years. "One out of three children born in the year 2000 will have diabetes in their lifetime—and that's just the white kids." For children of color, the risk jumps to 50 percent, partly because of higher rates of genetic predisposition. Hochstadt, who is also the creator of HELP (Healthy Eating & Lifestyle Program), a course for overweight pre-teens and teens, says her patients are predominantly middle class, but span the income strata. "We have patients from inner-city Bridgeport through Southport and Greenfield Hill, and excess weight is absolutely a problem across the board."

scary numbers

Let's take a closer look at the obesity numbers. Since the 1960s, the prevalence of obesity has increased by 54 percent in children 6 to 11 years old and by 39 percent in 12- to 17-year-olds. The prevalence of severe obesity jumped 98 percent and 64 percent in these groups, respectively. After an obese child reaches six years of age, the probability that obesity will persist exceeds 50 percent, and

70 to 80 percent of obese adolescents will remain so as adults.

Looking around Fairfield, you don't see a lot of obesity. However, "the population overall is growing," says Hochstadt. "The rates of overweight are increasing, even in affluent children. Our perception of overweight has changed. In my practice, as we plot BMI (body mass index, a measure that combines height and weight), we see children trending into the at-risk zone, and we don't even perceive that they're overweight. Our eyes no longer pick it up."

How do kids become overweight? An extra intake of only 50 to 100 calories per day will lead to a 5- to 10-pound weight gain over one year. The process may be very gradual, and it's a fact that most obese children become that way over several years. Is it all that high fructose corn syrup? The plethora of refined carbohydrates? The vegetable oil overkill? Or is it simply math—more calories in and fewer calories out?

what is healthy?

Says Fairfield pediatrician Kevin Strong, MD: "Often, families tell me that they eat healthy, but when I ask them what they eat, it's healthy compared to cultural standards, but not from a pediatrician's standpoint." Strong says one problem is portion sizes, which have grown exponentially since the 1960s and 1970s, as was revealed in Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary, *Super Size Me*. Of course, the giant portions in question are not of Brussels sprouts—they are sugary drinks, pasta, bagels, and sweetened cereals.

This points to the second problem Strong sees: the proliferation of processed

and packaged foods. "Your cart at the grocery store should look like the farmer's market," he says, "full of fresh fruits and vegetables." He says grains are a key issue here. "People think they're okay if they're buying organic cereal, snacks, and whole-wheat bread. But if it's processed, it doesn't really matter if it's organic. These aren't whole grains. Whole oatmeal is what you're looking for—or other grains in their intact state. When these grains are processed, they spike your blood sugar and your insulin comes pouring out, and then your sugar drops and you're hungry again."

Hunger pangs aren't the only problem. The constant rollercoaster of blood glucose and insulin caused by diets high in refined grains and sugar is the pathway to metabolic syndrome, prediabetes, and diabetes. Hochstadt says in the 1980s, she had not one patient with type 2 diabetes, yet today she sees a new case every week.

"They did a huge heart study in Louisiana, where they followed children for more than 20 years, checking their arteries as they entered young adulthood either by autopsy or carotid ultrasound," she says. "They found that, over the course of time, eating our typical American diet, there was thickening in the carotid artery in young adults. It showed that what we eat as children sets the stage for risk factors for stroke, heart disease, hypertension, kidney disorder. It's pretty scary."

And while malnutrition is far from a problem here in Fairfield County, kids' diets are lacking in nutrients that we know help prevent diseases—such as the phytochemicals found in veggies like leafy greens, broccoli, and spinach. "I

ent evidence that identifies "acceptable levels" for these toxins. But imagine how hard it is for anyone to predict the effects of minute amounts of a vast variety of poisons consumed sporadically from infancy through adulthood.

parenting triage

There's no question that parents in Fairfield and neighboring towns want to do right by their kids. But food is often viewed differently. Should the question of whether or not to get Tommy a reading tutor be weighed equally with the question of whether or not to say no to Lunchables and a Sprite?

In March 2006, a small group of mothers formed a PTA Council group called the Student Nutrition Improvement Panel (SNIP). Its members are impassioned mothers who want to see change...yesterday. They believe that nutrition should be integrated into the school curriculum, and that children need to be educated and guided on making healthy choices. These moms feel the quality of the food being served in



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they caved in and now sell it once a week. It not only doesn't adhere to healthy snack guidelines, it undermines the health curriculum, which teaches the idea of correct portion sizes and eating snacks and sweets in moderation," she says. The cookie isn't the only questionable food, either. Also on the à la carte list are items, such as stuffed crust pizza, pizza dippers, ice cream, and popsicles.

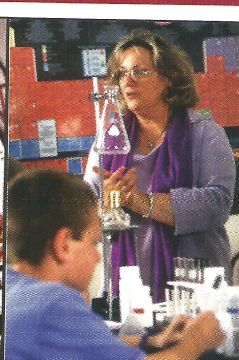
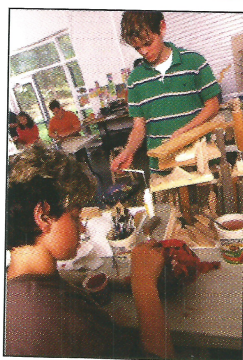
“One item that stirred up its own storm of controversy is the “big cookie” — a 500-calorie, chocolate chip cookie. SNIP members had a dietitian analyze it and reported that it has the same calories and fat as a McDonald's cheeseburger. “I personally witnessed kids at the middle school buying two of these cookies with juice and ice cream for their lunch.”

—Pat Raftery, SNIP spokesperson,
on “the big cookie”



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mitigating factors

Joann Fitzpatrick, Fairfield's Food Services Manager for the past 20 years, oversees the lunch program in all 16 Fairfield public schools. In menu planning, Fitzpatrick must choose vendors and design menus in such a way that students will choose to buy the food. This past year, she implemented rotating *specialty bars* in the high school, which feature different international cuisines, twice a week, in the hopes that kids would choose more complete meals. "If you present the food attractively, they will make wise choices."

Positive changes have been made in the past year, thanks to Fitzpatrick's efforts and those of SNIP. "Joann Fitzpatrick made the commitment to get rid of the snacks that were high in fat,

calories, or serving size to follow guidelines developed by the Connecticut Department of Education," says Raftery. "The kids were not happy about it, but in time, they either went back to buying school lunch or found new snacks to buy."

Fitzpatrick does not have an easy task. The food selection in any school lunch program is complex and involves many players. Parents and students complain when prices increase, which is generally necessary when you want to

Food Fight

Amy Kalafa and Susan Rubin are moms from Westchester and Fairfield County who were disgusted with what their kids were being fed at school. They made a documentary, *Two Angry Moms: Fighting for the Health of America's Children*, which showcases the problems with the National School Lunch Program. The movie, which was shown at the Community Theater in the spring, has had a ripple effect in communities across the country. Visit their website at angrymoms.org. Maybe you'll become the next angry mom (or dad)!

improve quality, and changes are difficult to implement for other reasons. Moreover, most schools operate under the dictates of the National School Lunch Program in order to stay afloat.

funding our food

With the National School Lunch model, menus must offer five items from four food components: one protein, two vegetables and/or fruits, one grain, and one milk. If a child purchases three of the five required component items, the school receives a cash reimbursement from the federal government. But that reimbursable meal might be chicken nuggets, milk, and bread—many children won't take the side fruit cup or vegetable unless it's put on their plate.

In addition to the cash reimbursement, every school is entitled to receive commodity foods at 16.75 cents for each reimbursable meal served. These commodity foods are derived from surplus, government-subsidized crops. When the School Lunch Program was developed in 1946, excess commodities helped feed undernourished American children.

Today's commodity crops are corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, and cotton. Agricultural policy is designed to promote overproduction of these crops, especially corn and soy. Most of the sugar we consume today comes from corn (corn syrup), most of the fat comes from soy

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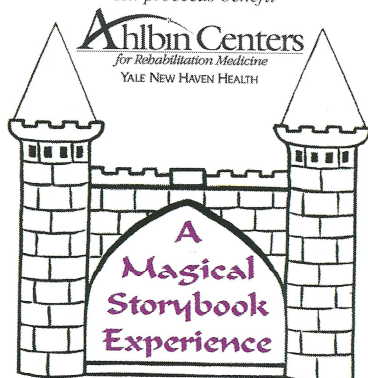
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(vegetable oil), and the plethora of refined carbohydrates comes from wheat.

The “farm bill” is the piece of legislation that controls all this, subsidizing those five crops to the tune of \$25 billion a year. The farm bill, unfortunately, does almost nothing to support farmers growing produce. Writes Michael Pollan in *The New York Times* (April 22, 2007): “The farm bill essentially treats our children as a human ‘Disposal’ for all the unhealthful calories that the farm bill has encouraged American farmers to overproduce.”

However, with an increased public awareness of obesity and diabetes, public support for organic farming, and years of media reports about nutrition and health, many believe change is now possible. This year, the farm bill will undergo revision, and one of the proposals asks for an additional \$50 million annually to buy fruits and vegetables for school meals. Stay tuned.


what next?

The SNIP parents believe change can happen without waiting years for the “trickle down” from new legislature. Last month, the Fairfield schools hosted a “Connecticut-Grown” event, offering students produce grown by local farmers. Unfortunately, says Fitzpatrick, the selection may have been limited, as the growing season was coming to an end. Still, Raftery sees this as an opportunity to educate and encourage students to be more active in decision making about food. Some children may have never seen a local, farm-fresh apple.

Raftery and her group have other ideas. One solution is to offer bundled, reimbursable meals—such as a sandwich with an apple or burrito and side of salad—rather than having students choose each individual item. Also, a bowl of fresh fruit could be placed at the cashier, with signage about the importance of fresh fruit. Food items could be labeled to identify good, better, and best nutritional choices. Their ideas are far from extravagant.

how you can help

A combined effort at both the local and federal levels is necessary to enact change. What can you do? Take a greater interest in what your children are eating both at home and at school. Visit their school cafeterias. Read the menu options with your children, and make choices together. Send comments to SNIP at fairfieldlunch@optonline.net.

Additional reporting for this article by Sarah Schwartz. 

“Often, families tell me that they eat healthy, but when I ask them what they eat, it’s healthy compared to cultural standards, but not from a pediatrician’s standpoint.”

—Kevin Strong, MD

think calcium and fiber are the two biggest nutrients missing in kids’ diets today,” says Heather Carey, MS, a chef and nutritionist who teaches healthy cooking classes, including one for parents. In addition to keeping on hand cheese, yogurt, and milk, Carey uses a rice cooker to make whole grains like quinoa, brown rice, and whole-wheat couscous for her family—which includes twin eight-year-olds and a six-year-old—and then doctors them up with soy sauce and olive oil or butter.

what’s in their food?

We know that kids’ health can be improved by including more healthy foods. But now let’s look at some things we

should consider banning from our diets.

If there’s any one ingredient every child in town probably consumes on a daily basis, it is high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). Like so many things, there isn’t any research to prove that the stuff is harmful to health, but plenty of people believe it’s just this side of toxic.

In a 2004 article in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, researchers explain that fructose does not stimulate the pancreas to release insulin, which in turn does not trigger the secretion of the hormone leptin—a substance instrumental in making us feel satiated. These researchers also point to the fact that the increased use of HFCS in the United States mirrors the dramatic increase in

obesity. HFCS now accounts for more than 40 percent of the caloric sweeteners added to food and drinks.

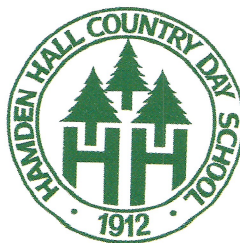
This and other attacks on HFCS prompted the Corn Refiners Association to create a website defending the sweetener. One point they make is that HFCS is not actually “high” in fructose—the proportions are roughly equivalent to table sugar, which is 50 percent fructose and 50 percent glucose. Other research, too, has challenged the idea that HFCS has contributed to the obesity epidemic. Still, the sweetener can be found not only in every non-diet soft drink, but in things like salad dressing, bread, and soup. Do we need chemically manufactured fructose-glucose concoctions in virtually everything we eat and drink?

And then there are the food additives and pesticides. United States law requires only that chemicals be deemed safe with “reasonable certainty.” Many of these additives have only been tested on animals—rodents to be exact. With pesticides, we know from the get-go that they are toxic, and manufacturers must pres-

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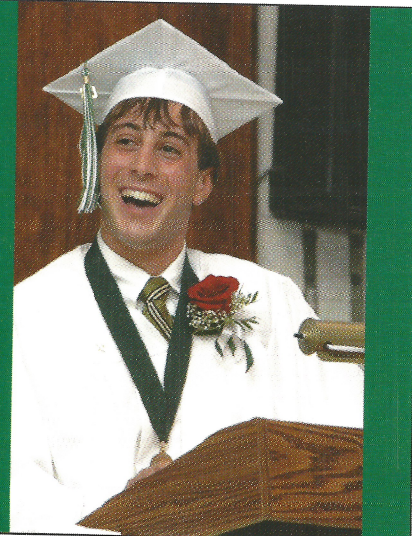
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schools is not giving kids the nutrients they need for optimal learning—academically, socially, and behaviorally.

“I wish parents would view their kids’ nutrition the way they view their education—every day, week, and year matter because of the long-term, cumulative effect,” says Analiese Paik, a founding member of SNIP. “We want well-educated children who can grow up to be successful adults, but we also want them to be healthy. That’s not where we’re going as a society, even in Fairfield.”

What’s so terrible about what our children are eating? According to SNIP members, the most dire issue at hand is the quality of the food being served in schools. The protein foods are over-processed, and there aren’t enough fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables. The chicken nuggets contain more than 100 ingredients, and “you have to be a chemist to read the list,” says Pat Raftery, SNIP spokesperson.

Another problem, the SNIP members point out, is the sheer amount of big-portion snack and à la carte options, known as *competitive foods*, which are introduced to students in middle school and compete against meals. Students can buy nachos, mozzarella sticks, and mini

Q&A with Dr. Judy: Pediatrician, Mom, and Healthy Eating Crusader

Q: So what do you tell parents who say, “He won’t eat anything healthy, what can I do?”

A: I ask parents: “What do you say to them when they don’t want to brush teeth? What do you say when they don’t want to go to bed?” It’s not multiple choice. You don’t have to be punitive. You say, “I understand, but this is what we are having for dinner,” and they get served a plate of food, which is half vegetable, protein the size of a palm, and a small (1/2 cup) portion of carbohydrate. The salad should be on the table, the cooked vegetable should be on the table. The protein of the meal should be on the counter in the kitchen. The empty carbs, whether it’s French fries, mashed potatoes, pasta, or rice—should be put away. And to drink? Only water or milk with dinner. Juice should be no more than 4 ounces daily (8 ounces for teens) and it should be 100 percent juice. Soda should be on special occasions only.

Q: How much should they have of sports drinks, like Gatorade?

A: Zero. If you run a marathon or you’re doing three to four hours of continued, strenuous, aerobic exercise, a Gatorade will benefit you—along with lots of water. You need about three bottles of water and one Gatorade, and that would be it. A child playing kindersoccer does not need a Gatorade.

Q: What if you serve healthy food at the table, and your child just refuses to eat?

A: So they don’t eat it and they might be hungry later. We’re not serving them milk and cookies, we’re going to take out dinner again: “You didn’t eat your dinner, you must be hungry.”

Then, “How about this? You can choose the vegetable you would like for dinner. Let’s go to the store together and you pick what you want, and then we’ll come home and prepare it together because maybe my tastes are different from your tastes. I’m willing to help you because this is a very important part of what you need to be healthy.”

Does this mean brown sugar might go on the carrots? And that you may have to put—God help us—Cheese Wiz on broccoli initially? Maybe yes. In order to acquire a taste, kids have to taste it. Sometimes you may have to be a little sneaky—your pasta sauce can have carrots, zucchini, and spinach in it. It’s amazing what you can put through a Cuisinart and into sauces, muffins, or a lasagna. The palate will keep tasting the vegetable flavor, and it will begin to sophisticate. Adults eat beets, Roquefort salads, and sea bass. How fast you move your child in that direction depends on what you feed them.



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hamburgers microwaved in cellophane, rather than choosing balanced meals.

One item that stirred up its own storm of controversy is the “big cookie”—a 500-calorie, chocolate chip cookie. SNIP members had a dietitian analyze it and reported that it has the same calories and fat as a McDonald’s cheeseburger. “I personally witnessed kids at the middle school buying two of these cookies with juice and ice cream for their lunch,” says Raftery. “We have repeatedly asked that they go back to selling single-size, healthier snack options. But because the kids missed this “big cookie,”