



A recent and excellent BBC television series, *Honey we're killing the kids*, graphically illustrated how parents are abdicating responsibility for healthy nutrition and lifestyle at home. As a result, this generation may be the first where the parents outlive their children, suggests **Carolyn Moody**.

# Obesity in children: reflection of a society gone mad?

While current concern is focused on obesity as a cause of health problems, the fact is that obesity is just a physical symptom and a visual sign that our children's health is in steep decline. Obesity itself does not cause type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer or any of the other health problems associated with poor nutrition. The conditions that lead to obesity are also those in which disease flourishes. Osteoporosis, a disease traditionally associated with post-menopausal women, is now increasingly being found among teenagers.

It is good news that the BMA has decided to throw its weight behind a campaign to curtail the advertising activities of the giant food manufacturers—see box. Campaigners on the ground have been fighting to change

the status quo, currently stacked in favour of food industry profits.

## Madness prevails

But what kind of madness is it where food manufacturers, whose top priority is company profit, are allowed to peddle their unhealthy wares through high-pressured advertising aimed at children; where supermarkets collude with the manufacturers by displaying unhealthy snacks and drinks at checkouts; where schools are forced to house vending machines to attract badly

needed income; and where parents have lost the confidence to say “no” to health-harming snacks and drinks?

We as a society are allowing a whole generation of children to grow up in ignorance about how to eat properly and stay healthy. This includes lack of physical activity as schools cut back on physical education, and working parents have less time and energy to encourage family activities.

Many teachers feel under pressure trying to teach children who cannot sit still or

concentrate. They all point to poor nutrition habits and lack of parental influence as the cause, citing lunch boxes full of synthetic ‘food’, and children who consume sugary snacks and fizzy drinks for breakfast.

In Europe, we are fortunate to have a plentiful supply of inexpensive food, yet our children are suffering from malnutrition. They are lacking protein, good fats, fibre, vitamins and minerals, all needed for good health. Instead, we are letting them consume excessive amounts of sugar, salt, refined carbohydrates and hydrogenated vegetable fats, all of which promote a constant need for food but never a feeling of satisfaction.



## Health problems

Children who need to lose weight should be encouraged to eat health-promoting foods that cut out all sugar, refined starch and hydrogenated vegetable oils. In some cases, dairy products and wheat should be excluded. We can become sensitised to the foods we over consume, as witnessed in children with allergies.

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## PARENTS AND ‘PESTER POWER’

*Clever marketing and packaging of children's food and drink often creates tense times for parents at the supermarket.*

But worse than that, it directly influences their diet at a vulnerable age. Industry must act more responsibly when marketing to children, which is why the British Medical Association recently welcomed the European Commission's Diet, Physical Activity and Health Platform ([ec.europa.eu/health/ph\\_determinants/life\\_style/nutrition/platform/platform\\_db\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/platform/platform_db_en.htm)).

This ongoing consultation requires the food and drinks industry to find solutions with health experts, such as the European Heart Network, to the fast-growing problem of obesity. But if industry and campaigners cannot agree on the way ahead, the Commission will step in with tough regulations.

Health campaigners have tried with limited success to restrict food advertising to children – products high in fat, salt and sugar account for over half of all food adverts. We are now seeing diet-induced health conditions in children, such as high blood cholesterol levels, atherosclerosis, and type 2 diabetes, previously found only in adults.

There are more than 14 million overweight children in Europe, with another 400,000 becoming overweight annually. Three million children are obese, and every year there will be 85,000 more. Evidence suggests there is a 50% chance of overweight children being overweight in adulthood.

The rise in obesity has been too rapid for the primary factors to be genetic. What we buy in the supermarket, what they eat at school and lack of exercise are the real culprits. The Platform should recommend more sports playing fields and more school time for children to exercise in them; and more cycle lanes and safer roads to encourage greater outdoor activity.

The BMA is supporting European level initiatives to combat both childhood and adult obesity. But the one group both the European Commission and industry should be listening to is parents. Parent power will make the biggest difference in the end.

*Kevin Doran, former BMA EU liaison officer in Brussels, writes here in a personal capacity.*

Within one month of eating three meals per day of health-promoting, ‘real’ food, children report sleeping better, having more energy, concentrating better and feeling happier. Gone are the headaches, aching muscles and joints, sinusitis, blocked noses and ears, they have fewer infections and, of course, they lose weight. After around three months of healthy eating, children on medication for allergic conditions are often able to reduce or stop their medication completely.

## Support for parents

Parents must feel okay about saying “no” to their kids; to setting limits and dictating how the family will eat. Children need adults to show them the way. At first, they may object strongly. Parents who explain what they are doing and why, who involve their kids in shopping and food preparation, and who can tough it out for up to three weeks (about the time it takes for kids to realise there is no turning back) without giving in, will earn their children's respect while increasing their own.

The younger they are, the easier it is to control the family's eating habits. But it's never too late to make changes. As a mother of two, I can honestly say it was worth sticking to my convictions.

There were certain rules that never wavered. One was no fizzy drinks or sugar in our house – they learnt to appreciate the taste of real food without adding sugar to everything. No commercial sweets or chocolate. No desserts except fresh fruit salad. Now in their twenties, they are slim, healthy adults who claim they appreciated my resolve. They knew where the boundaries were, which made them feel safe and secure. Isn't that what we all want for our children?



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