

# Teaching children how to eat

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*Prue Leith argues that food and cooking need to be part of education if children are to understand, respect, and like eating good healthy food. If we don't want them to grow up fat, if we don't want to pay for their future health problems, if we want a sustainable rural economy, if we want to do right by the planet, we have to change our behaviour, and the only way to do that is to teach children how to eat.*

Experts, especially nutritionists and dietitians, can sometimes shoot themselves in the foot. Years ago I was called into a hospital by the management to advise on their food which the patients were not eating. It wasn't difficult to see why. It was inedible. It had been cooked (or 'reconstituted') at dawn from pre-prepared, mostly frozen, ingredients, and had sat in a hot trolley all morning, and was served in those awful prison trays with dips in them. It met the nutritional standards laid down by the dietitians. Fine, but a food offer is not a diet. People have to *eat* the food before it can be called a diet.

One woman of 88, in hospital because she'd broken her hip, complained to me that she hated wholemeal bread and rock-hard poached eggs, salad made of tough cabbage and seeds that got under her teeth. She preferred canned peaches to the unsweetened apple chunks, bits of orange and few grapes that passed as fresh fruit salad. She wanted the diet she was used to: Mother's pride, fried eggs and baked beans with tinned fruit to follow. Well, she'd got to 88 on that diet; this was hardly the moment to get her to change.

To prevent her continuing to lose weight at the hands of a regime trying to do her good, her daughter brought her chocolate, biscuits and cake. Not a result the nutritionists could have wanted.

What that hospital needed, at least for the vast majority of its patients who did not require special diets, was to apply some common sense: good wholesome *delicious* food, cooked from scratch every day in small batches, by properly trained cooks, and served as soon as it is cooked. And if the menu is simple and the kitchen well equipped, that is achievable. And has the added benefits of cooks preferring to cook real food, and nurses being prepared to serve it – previously they had refused to – distancing themselves from something they were ashamed of.

For the past three years I have been concerned with school food (rather than hospital food). But the issues have been the same. And again common sense is the medicine required. When I stepped down (from the School Food Trust) on my 70th birthday, I had to make a speech at my farewell do, and I took the opportunity to

implore the Secretary of State to keep his nose to the grindstone in the matter of school food. I said:

When I accepted the job as Chair of the Trust, I said that I thought it the most important job I'd ever done. And so it has proved.

But I did hugely under-estimate the task.

I had this naive idea that we could do the job and wind ourselves up in three years. That all schools needed to do was to teach children about food and how to cook, stop them bringing food or drinks into school, ban vending machines, close the school gates at lunch time, make the kitchens efficient and the dining rooms pleasant places to be, provide delicious healthy meals, and get the parents to refrain from rewarding their little darlings for eating up their greens by giving them a kit-kat.

And, I thought, in three years, almost every child in the country would have learned to like good food. Bingo, we could all go home.

I swiftly discovered it wasn't as simple as that. But we have made great progress. There are now many schools doing all, or nearly all, those things successfully.

We've stopped the 50-year slide in school dinner take-up, and though of course it would be great to have got the numbers back to 1960 levels, it is no mean achievement to have 40 per cent of children eating good healthy meals instead of junk.

I had also assumed that head teachers and governing bodies would see the point of a decent diet and good food education, would accept that healthy children would concentrate better, be happier, achieve more. And that they would be keen to upgrade their dining rooms and kitchens.

But I soon found that many teachers felt what children ate was a matter for their parents. And that available money would be better spent on something else. And that catering cost money so the less of it the better. My argument is that you would not have disgusting loos or dangerous playgrounds just because they do not cover their costs. Children should not have to spend half their break queuing, they should be able to eat in pleasant surroundings, have time to relax and not be bullied. And anyway, the better the catering operation, the more bums on seats and the closer to break-even or even profit.

But, thank God, attitudes have changed fast. Only last week I was on the Today programme expecting to have a barney with the General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers only to have her agree with everything I said. That would not have happened three years ago. Of course it is easier to effect

change if the law is on your side, and the requirement to teach cooking in schools, and the statutory lunch standards have certainly helped focus minds.

Then I had supposed that all school cooks could cook. Wrong. Many cooks were hired in the Turkey Twizzler era when cooking wasn't needed. Well, we now have 29 SchoolFeast centres training, encouraging and inspiring catering staff. It was a struggle at first: it astonished me that schools and local authorities, who would not dream of failing to update the skills of their teachers, seemed to think training catering staff a luxury they could not afford. But SchoolFeast is going like a train now, and delicious, nicely cooked, fresh food is the norm in schools, rather than the exception.

And then I had imagined that parents would be thrilled that their children could now get proper food at school. But persuading them that a £2 healthy lunch is good value when the chippy offers all-the-chips-you-can-eat for a pound is another matter. So of course we are pleased by the recent announcement of the widening of the eligibility for free school meals. Definitely a step in the right direction.

And our 3000 Lottery-funded Let's Get Cooking clubs, soon to be 5000, which are for children *and their parents*, have been a cracking success with heartening research showing participating families not just learning to cook but changing the way they eat at home.

I am perfectly confident that the School Food Trust will continue to win over children, parents, teachers, local authorities, school governors and caterers. In the next few years, while the press is still on our side, and Government is perforce focused on the cost of ill-health, eating school lunches will become, I believe, the cool thing to do.

But I must tell you what scares me rigid. It is the power of the manufacturers to sell junk to children. With the demise of the family 'knees-under' meal and the rise of the snacking-all-day culture, we could see our advances undone in the next generation. We need to go on teaching children about food, and how to cook, and how to eat, for ever. Until we accept that teaching children to *like* good food is as important to their future success as being literate or numerate, children will inevitably succumb to the blandishments of the chip, crisp, and chocolate manufacturers, who have massive marketing budgets and know how to sell sand to Bedouins – selling sugar, salt and fat to kids is a walk in the park.

My message to Government is simple: do not drop your guard. Keep food a priority. But I would also like to acknowledge that in 40 years of banging on government doors, bleating about the importance of food in schools, this government has been the first to grab the issue and do something about it. I know they had a little nudge from Saint Jamie, but they have really run with it. So thank you.'

So, what, exactly, drives the School Food Trust? How did we arrive at the nutritional standards we now impose on schools? Well strictly, it was the Schools Meal Review Panel that set the regulatory framework for the nutritional standards in schools, and, though of course they took advice from nutritionists and dietitians, they essentially took a pragmatic, common-sense approach as does the Trust.

You could, of course, argue that we do not have sufficient, scientific evidence for what we suggest, such as:

- non-sweetened foods are an acquired taste;
- peer pressure is a real factor in food choices;
- children who are interested in food and cooking have a more varied diet and are more prepared to try new foods;
- children on a healthy diet perform better than those on a poor diet;
- violence and bad behaviour are exacerbated by a diet of junk
- a high-additive diet promotes hyperactivity.

Of course these are areas that could do with more study. It would be good if we could use such evidence to lobby for more controls on advertising to children and more responsibility on the part of retailers and manufacturers. We could also more easily persuade doubters in schools of the need for action.

But frankly, any one who has worked in any of these areas believes them to be true. Let me take them one by one:

First, non-sweetened food is an acquired taste. When Fergus Lowe, then Head of the Psychology Department of Bangor University, decided to fight fire with fire and design a program to get children to eat fruit and veg which used the same psychological levers as commercials and advertisements use to get children to eat snacks, like wanting to belong to a group, like following the adventures of hero characters, like the desire to win recognition and small prizes (stickers and branded pencils etc), his results were extraordinary, with fruit uptake going from single figures to 80% and more, and veg consumption rising from something like 5% to 70% in the two weeks of intervention.

But what he had not reckoned on was the permanence of the change in the children's eating. When the intervention was over and there were no more Food Dude stories, no more Food Dude videos, no more pictures to colour in and prizes to win, he thought the children, or a good many of them, might stop eating fruit and veg. But they didn't. He now believes that was largely because over the two weeks of the intervention, the repeated consumption of unfamiliar foods got the children to like them.

This should not be a surprise to us. Our grandparents got to like liver and tripe, dripping on toast, jellied eels and all sorts, because they were obliged to eat what was

before them, and since liver came up once a week, as did faggots or tripe, they got to like them. Most of my generation, though not forced to eat up, did not get any alternative if they didn't, so generally ended by eating, and consequently liking, pretty well everything. My children, on the other hand, were never forced to eat anything, but they were encouraged and coaxed to eat what I gave them, and eventually – but it took years – got to like a wide variety of food. Today's children are not forced *or* encouraged, and indeed they are often offered a pick-your-own-ready-meal choice. So of course they grow up with a narrow appreciation of food. They have had no chance to repeatedly eat something which at first they disliked.

Now to my second claim, that peer pressure is a factor in the food children choose. Fergus Lowe thinks this was another factor in the success of the Food Dudes programme. New pupils, joining a class of their peers happily tucking into raw salsify and broccoli, or cooked leeks and carrots, quickly adapted.

We see the reverse of this all the time. Primary school children, who have been taught to eat healthily and do so happily, will not retain those good habits if they go to a secondary school which does not allow them, in their first year there, to eat separately from the big children. They need a year with no one mocking them for eating cabbage, or for being able to handle a knife and fork. After that, with luck, they will be strong enough to do what they want to.

I visited a primary school in Hull, which must be one of the most deprived towns in Europe. Not one of the children arrives at that school able to handle a knife and fork. Their food, and indeed their parents', has all been hand-held or edible with a spoon. But they are taught to eat with knife and fork, to sit down at table, to talk to each other, and generally to enjoy a quiet, relaxed, hot nutritious lunch. I congratulated the Head on what she had achieved, saying something like 'You have saved generations of children from a life of obesity and social exclusion and given them a passport to pleasure'. She looked at me and said, 'No I haven't. When they leave here they will all go to the local Secondary, which has a dining room that cannot cope, the year-sevens have to push and shove in the queue with the big boys, and the school lets everyone out to go buy chips down the road. There good habits will not last a week'.

Next, I cannot prove that children who cook eat better. But every food teacher knows of many children who start as uncooperative and saying things like 'Yuk', 'Gross' 'I'm not eating that' and ending up enthusiastically eating what they've cooked. And there is evidence from the Let's Get Cooking after-school clubs and the Focus on Food initiative that teaches children to cook in the curriculum, that parents can change the way they eat at home as a result of direct learning or pressure from their children.

So next, is it true that children on a healthy diet perform better than those on a poor diet? There is probably more evidence for this than for most of my common-sense dictums, but the problem is that poverty leads to a poor diet and there are all the myriad other features of poverty – poor housing, lack of parental education, etc – that could be responsible. But let me tell you of one bit of hard evidence from a school in London.

The head there simply compared the exam results of children taking free school meals (which would indicate that they are the poorest of her cohort) with those children bringing in packed lunches, which are, on average, very much less healthy

than school dinners. The children having the school lunches were performing 8% on average better than the others in their academic tests. Which they were not doing before the healthy lunches came in. I don't find this at all surprising. We know a healthy diet affects the body. Why on earth would it not affect the brain? Magic Breakfasts, the charity that encourages breakfast provision in schools, also has evidence that children eating breakfast at school do better than those buying a chocolate bar or packet of crisps and a coke on the way to school.

Finally, I don't think there should be any doubt that some additives cause bad behaviour. This at least is less and less disputed. Until recently it was easy to rubbish the research: 'Not conducted properly', 'Too small a sample', 'Done in prisons, not schools', 'Not done in the UK' etc. But the Food Standards Authority has done its own review of all the research and agreed that there is a connection. Parents and teachers have known for years that a dose of fizzy pop or ice-cream will have a child hyperactive. Hooray. Now so does officialdom.

But its not just additives. Poor diet generally contributes to violent behaviour. The best documented research is that of Bernard Gesch, from Oxford University, who has done double-blind trials in prisons, in the UK and abroad, and found that among prisoners given supplements to bring their nutrients up to recommended levels, violent behaviour reduced by at least 30%.

And finally, I cannot help feeling that, even if none of this were true, surely feeding people properly cannot do them any harm?

So, to obesity: a subject that makes me a little uneasy. Yes, obesity is a real problem, and yes we need to do something about it. But banging on about the shortening of life expectancy, the dangers of heart attack and stroke, the risk of limb amputation caused by diabetes, is not, I think, the way to get the nation to slim down.

I think, rather than crying doom and disaster, we need to hit the levers that motivate change. We need to concentrate on the pleasures of food, the satisfaction in the ability to cook, the joy of feeding the family round a table, the benefits of waking up feeling good, being able to run up stairs, and so on.

Children need to be taught about food. The experience of many schools is that if children can be interested in the whole subject of food, by learning about farming, and sustainability, maybe by growing their own vegetables, and of course cooking, they eat better.

Cooking at last has a place, albeit a small one, on the curriculum for the first time ever. Every school that offers Food Technology must provide basic cooking lessons for every child in the school, whether or not they take Food Tech. The 20% of secondary schools that do not offer food tech or home economics must provide for every child by September next year.

But, I'm often asked, what on earth can you achieve in, say a once weekly lesson for a term? Well, the truth is a lot. If the teacher has the good sense to teach simple dishes rather than boring techniques, students will learn enough to spark an interest, to realize that cooking is easy, and fun. If you left school having learnt to make lamb kebabs, fish pie, vegetable lasagne, Thai green curry, tomato soup, Spag Bol, roast chicken and meatballs in tomato sauce, it would be a pretty good start, and you could feed yourself and your friends at uni. And with luck children will be inspired to join, or start, a cookery club.

The School Food Trust sees its job, essentially, as persuading children, parents, teachers, caterers, governors and local authorities of the importance of good food in schools.

*First, the children:* The trust runs ad campaigns for primary schools (mostly with Disney as our partner: for example we had Ratatouille posters in all school dining rooms with the Rat encouraging children to eat well); for teenagers the Trust uses sporting or pop heroes, and have campaigns through teenagers' mobile phones and computers, edgy ads that they pass on to their mates.

*Next parents:* the Trust has ad campaigns for them too, explaining about the improved food in schools, urging them to join the cookery clubs, the website has recipes and advice on lunchboxes, and the Trust actively supports a national parents' organization to badger and persuade local authorities and schools to do better. Parent power can work. Jacqui Schneider, a parent from Merton in London led a group of parents to confront the local council, and eventually got 42 new kitchens built in primary schools that previously had only a delivered packed lunch service.

*For cooks and caterers* we ran nationwide conferences to bring school cooks together and inspire them to press for more involvement in their school, for better kitchens and dining rooms, to cook better and more attractive food, to make sure they get the training they need. And the Trust continues to provide advice and help on meeting the nutritional standards, on kitchen design, on efficiency and much more.

Most important, we set up a nationwide network of training centres for school cooks called SchoolFEAST which provides courses to upgrade their skills, bring their food knowledge (of sourcing, sustainability, nutrition – none of which they would have learnt if they were in college years ago) up to speed. The centres also teach efficiency and management skills and, most important, inspire the cooks and impress upon them just how important their jobs are.

For too long schools cooks have been the Cinderella of the hospitality industry, coming in the back door, slaving away, exiting via the back door and with no communication from the head except perhaps an all too frequent request to reduce the budget.

*Head teachers:* The most difficult, but important audience is that of head teachers. The Trust tries hard, through newsletters, publications, the web and conferences to influence them. There are case studies on our website of schools that have overcome huge odds to improve school food uptake. And there's a Million Meals campaign which concentrates on ways to get more children into the dining room. Heads need a vibrant catering service. Losing money is dispiriting and de-motivating and could end in disaster. We need schools to at least break even, if not make a profit. Though of course no one wants to go back to the business of selling junk to children in order to finance the mini van or books for the library.

I would say this is currently the Trust's most urgent bit of work. If they can get numbers up by 4% per year, in a few years more than half of England's school children will be eating school dinners and the majority will begin to influence the minority, making it easier to further increase take-up.

But there is one big obstacle for many schools: obsolete kitchens or no kitchens, dining rooms that have been reduced or used for other purposes. If a head is coping with 1400 students and only has 100 seats in the restaurant, it must be tempting to

open the school gates and hope the chippy down the road will feed them. But there are solutions: some schools have staggered the school day, some have used their capital allocation to build new facilities.

*Local authorities.* Local government authorities vary from those that really get it, and do everything they can to help schools improve their school dinners, to the head-in-the-sand councils who are immune to persuasion. But I think the tide is against them, and shame, if not desire, will end up making them do the right thing. The Trust has School Food Ambassadors in every LA, and it is their job to visit schools and help them with all these initiatives: Million Meals, SchoolFEAST, LetsGetCooking clubs, etc.

Finally we try to influence *bursars and governors* of schools because they say how money is spent. I think bursars will be particularly interested in our efficiency study which is based on the way Finland has tackled very similar problems to ours.

Seventeen years ago Finland had an enormous obesity, heart attack and stroke problem and decided to tackle it through education.

- today less than 2% of Finnish adults and 1.5 % of Finnish children are obese
- school meals costs are £1.59 per head (compared with £1.87 in the UK),
- numbers of staff employed are less than half those in the UK: we saw an operation feeding 1000 people with four full-time staff and one part-timer where we would typically have had 10 or 12, sometimes as many as 15 staff. and the square metre ‘footprint’ needed for a kitchen is about a third of the size of our old-fashioned ill-equipped kitchens.

The central tenet of the Finnish system is that lunch is regarded as an educational opportunity. Children and young people are taught essential life skills focused around the provision and enjoyment of food – how to appreciate and enjoy a balanced diet, how to like different foods, how to understand different cultures from around the world, to be responsible about serving, clearing and keeping the dining room tidy, and how to relax and socialize with their peers and mentors. Food is part of the health, social and academic (nutrition, ecology, geography, etc) curricula. All pupils are taught to cook, and all have a week in the school kitchen as part of their work experience.

The Finnish Government, the teachers and the parents know that if there is a choice of food on the menu, the children will choose what they are familiar with and know they will like, rather than try new things. So there is no choice, but the menu changes daily. Children and young people all help themselves to as much or as little of the school meal on offer and are expected to eat what they take. In this way, over time, children get to eat, and subsequently to enjoy, a wide range of different foods.

Food is state-funded, both for cookery classes and for lunch, in the same way as other educational materials like clay and paint for art classes or chemicals for chemistry are. But of course though funding must be adequate to ensure the educational and healthy school aims, there is nonetheless an obligation to keep it as low as possible. And tightly controlled and comparatively low costs are achieved by the combination of a no-choice well-balanced menu, participation by the students, and good modern equipment which reduces the hours needed for manual labour.

With costs in the UK rising as they are we have to find economic solutions if the school meal service is to go on improving and not slip back to the pre-Jamie days. Of course the fact that all meals in Finnish schools are free helps achieve the kind of catering the government wants – if the Government is paying it can reasonably argue that it has a duty to provide good value for money and healthy food – but I believe, even with our minimally-funded school meals, the Finnish model is a good one to learn from.

Some schools are there already, or half way there. Mossbourne Academy in Hackney has a 95% uptake of school dinners, parental endorsement, a minimum-choice menu, sit-down meals and excellent behaviour. And their catchment area is one of the most deprived boroughs in Europe. So it can be done.

And finally, here is a cheering thought: many thinking people worry about basically three things to do with food:

- First: We will not be able to feed the world as the developing world starts to eat the diet of the rich (more meat, less veg). It takes 20 times more land area to feed people on meat (by growing feed for animals, and raising them) than it would if we just ate the crops, cereal or veg, without processing them into meat.
- Second: Food is becoming unaffordable
- Third: Food is making us fat

Well, if we can just do as the children of Finland do, we can solve all those problems. The week I was there one school was studying the food of Italy. On day one they had a big soup, a minestrone thick with vegetables, beans and pasta, with a small amount of chicken and sausage in it. On the next day they had a mushroom and bacon risotto with a very little bacon and a lot of rice and veg. The third day was pasta with tomato and cheese. And so on.

What we should be eating, for our health, for our pockets and for the planet is composite dishes based on carbohydrates and veg, with a small amount of protein and an even smaller amount of fat. Dishes like the Spanish 'Old clothes': chickpea and onion stew with a little bit of chicken or pork; or Paella, with lots of rice and veg and not much seafood; or the French Cassoulet, mainly made of haricot beans and a bit of duck or lamb; or Italian Spaghetti Bolognese with minimal amounts of meat sauce; or American Boston Baked beans with mostly beans and veg and a bit of bacon; or Middle Eastern Meze of 80% vegetable dishes with a very few meat ones, or Scotland's Cock a leekie, or Haggis, or... you get the picture.

The only hope we really have of getting this transformation of our diet is through teaching our children how to eat.

Nothing could be more important. We just have to do it.