

SPECIAL REPORT:

A healthy child — nutrition and wellbeing

The changing menu at McDonald's is not incidental. Australians are becoming much more conscious of their health. Our children's diets are out of balance with their level of activity.

What can we do about it? Experts and educators share their thoughts.

Pie 'n' sauce please

Pie 'n' sauce please, miss, and a can of coke! And a cream bun, ta. You probably won't be hearing these common tuckshop refrains from yesteryear quite as often in today's school canteens. There has been a revolution taking place on the menu.

With the release last year of the NSW healthy schools canteen strategy, by a coterie of concerned organisations — including the NSW Department's of Health, and of Education and Training — a nutritional line has now been drawn in the sand between competing aims.

Some of these aims have included fundraising activities, involving sponsorships from fast food businesses operating in schools, along with the commercial realities of running a profitable school canteen, and, of course, adequately feeding the students for maximum learning output.

Finding a balance between these has not been easy and, as is often the case in our modern communities, our concern with the cost of things outweighs the perceived value of providing the best. This leads to

compromises that, in this instance, have brought about a proliferation of unhealthy food in our schools.

Takeaway food in this country has a long tradition of being nutritionally very poor. Its manufacture and retailing is built on low margins and the use of bulk ingredients that most often do not take fat and fibre content into consideration.

The proliferation of pastry-encased and deepfried foods and sugary carbonated drinks — and our general acceptance of this — have maintained this status quo.

Since the advent of franchised fast food outlets, the bottom line is always profitability. Our laissez-faire attitude to what has been served up in our school canteens, at the footy and in shopping centres has triggered a dramatic increase in the obesity rates of Australian children, and Australians in general.

Kids; they can eat anything, they're always running around and burning it off!

But are they? In our move as a society to the *clever country* we may have become the *fat clever country*.

Falling levels of sport participation; increased time spent in sedentary pursuits like computer games, digital TV and the internet; and parental concern about their children's safety on the streets have all contributed to a less active population of Australian children.

In short, these children can no longer afford the luxury of a high-fat and high-carbohydrate diet, without the consequence of childhood obesity.

Is it possible to turn back the clock and encourage our children — en masse — to surf life-saving clubs, football teams and little athletics? Probably not, as the heroes and heroines who inhabit our movie screens today are often drawn from computer games and are defined by their smarts and willingness to beat the system.

Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* and Keanu Reeves' character in *The Matrix*, Neo, have a virtual power that comes from the infinite nature of the cyber world and not from the glories of the sporting field. Today's badges of honour are mostly high-tech gadgets. The iPod, a digital camera, the latest mobile phone — with sophisticated



The Pittwater House Schools has successfully implemented a healthy eating program for all students.

camera facilities, of course — are all a long way from the shiny red bike.

'Man I am going places inside my head!' The refrain for this generation?

Is our children's diet just a reflection of what we as a society eat?

Pizza, burgers, fried chicken, kebabs, and takeaway curries — are we eating far more of them than we were, say, 20 years ago? Quite possibly, and their availability shows no sign of diminishing.

In this time-poor, technologically driven age, where we are working longer hours for more money than ever before, it is more time-efficient — and in many cases, cheaper — to dial up that delivery. But it is not nutritionally wise.

High fat content, low fibre and processed, nutritionally poor ingredients are the fast-food common denominators. Our obsession as a modern community with time-saving options and technological shortcuts has led us a long way from good eating habits. But, will we heed the warning bells in time?

The Fresh Tastes School NSW Healthy School Canteen campaign may be the first serious initiative to put the nutritional health of our children at the top of our priorities list. With contributions from nutritional luminaries like Dr Rosemary Stanton OAM, it is a definite step in the right direction. Based around a canteen menu-planning guide, which draws its principles from the Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children, the strategy places foods into three colour-coded groups.

The first is RED and contains all our old favourites — deepfried foods, sugary drinks, chips, cream buns and the like. Confectionery and icecream are on the rare treat proviso, with instructions to school canteens to sell these on only two occasions per school term.

The second group is classified AMBER and instructs to select carefully. As with the orange traffic light there is some decision to be made here. How healthy is that pie? Can the school canteen source a healthier kind of pie? The other thing to keep in mind is making serves

moderate and attempting to choose foods that contain reduced levels of saturated fats, salt and sugar.

Finally, there is GREEN. Its directive is to fill the menu with good foods that include fresh fruit, salads, healthy grains in high-fibre breads and cereals, and healthy juices and purified waters.

Will this controlled-supply/ignored-demand style of economics actually work? Or will children whose home diets do not reflect these green attitudes simply opt out of the canteen system? We will have to wait and see. A sure way to increase demand is to normalise the concept of nutritious, delicious food. This must begin at home.

Back to the kitchen!

An option close to my heart is to involve children creatively in the production of food, taking food technology out of the classroom and into the school canteen and the home kitchen, of course. Children are highly prone to the 'I want it right now!' syndrome when it comes to eating food. Emphasising the origin of ingredients and how food is prepared

Recommendations from the New South Wales Department of Health

What can I do about childhood obesity?

A healthy weight can be maintained by balancing the amount of energy going into a child's body (as food and drink) and the energy being used (for a child's body to function and grow and physical activity). Eating a balanced diet and leading a physically active lifestyle can help maintain a healthy weight.

General suggestions:

- Overweight and obese children need support, acceptance and encouragement from their parents and carers. Children should know that they are loved and appreciated regardless of their weight.
- Parents and carers should focus on their child's health and positive qualities, not the child's weight.
- Overweight and obese children should not be made to feel different. Gradually changing the family's physical activity and eating habits should be the focus for parents and carers, rather than the child's weight.



Clayfield College boarder, Cassandra Gundry, is part of the tennis program at the school

Physical activity suggestions:

- Be more physically active, or 'move more'. It is recommended that Australian adults accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week. Children should be active every day in as many ways as they can, and there are additional benefits in more vigorous activity.
- Encourage family activities that include enjoyable physical activity for everyone.
- Ensure a safe environment for children and their friends to engage in active play, such as swimming, cycling or ball sports.
- Decrease the time spent in sedentary activities, such as watching TV or playing video and computer games.
- Encourage 'active commuting', such as walking to school or the shops, or taking the bus, when appropriate.

Nutrition suggestions:

- Follow the *Australian Guide to Health Eating*, www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/strateg/food/guide/
- Children should be encouraged to drink water and to limit their intake of sugary beverages like soft drinks.
- Plan for healthy snacks and provide healthy options such as fresh fruit and vegetables, instead

- of snacks that are high in fat and sugars, and low in essential nutrients.
- Avoid the use of food as either a reward, or withholding as a punishment.
- Plan to eat home-cooked meals together as a family as often as possible.
- Discourage eating meals or snacks while watching TV.
- Encourage children to eat a healthy breakfast as a good way to start the day.

Note: Taken from

http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/adult/what_to_do.html

could reverse this cultural dynamic of instant gratification.

Children in the kitchen — not as a chore, but rather as a labour of love — could also assist the time-poor modern parents in the preparation of a meal. Who says their time is better spent in front of the computer? Cooking is a science after all.

Feeding ourselves is, obviously, a prerequisite for living, but could we be missing something? For too long cooking and food technology have been at the bottom of our list of educational values. The natural outcome of this is poor health and a generation of young people who can barely make toast.

Are we so interested in developing a society of specialists who focus only on their area of expertise or do we still want to produce well-rounded individuals who can cook and clean, no matter what gender, recognise a variety of fresh produce and take creative delight in preparing a wonderful meal for friends and family? We want our children to be independent and isn't this part of it?

In the great spiritual traditions of India, when a devotee first comes to a Guru's commune, he is put to work in the kitchen. For it is there that he will come to understand the workings of his own mind and the dynamics of the community. The kitchen is our first laboratory in history and the place where chemistry and much of science originated.

A true understanding of nutrition grows out of the experience of food preparation, appreciating the different properties of food as they interact with the elements. Taste, smell, touch, see, and hear what happens during the process. There is much to be learnt when we relate our academic understanding back to the real world, when we can sense the beauty and flavour of delicious food and know why it is so!

— by **Sudha Hamilton, food editor of *WellBeing* magazine, father, culinary enthusiast and a vegetarian chef of more than 20 years experience**

Health in action

Pittwater House Schools, through its mothers association canteen committee, took up the challenge of the NSW government to involve all school canteens in the Healthy School Canteen strategy. This strategy resulted from the NSW Obesity Summit and was put in place



Around Father's Day, Massie House (Kambala) conducts Men at Massie. This week gives the dads the opportunity to participate in what their daughters are doing for a change. Father-daughter cooking was on the agenda this particular morning — and the fathers didn't want to leave!

to address the food on sale to children in school canteens.

The food available at the Pittwater House canteen has always been healthy and varied, but in adopting the Healthy School strategy, the different menus available each term were totally reviewed. The canteen launched its Fresh Tastes at School program in 2004, removed the most unhealthy items from the menu and provided the government's RED (occasionally), AMBER (select carefully) and GREEN (fill the menu), keys to all items now sold.

Through this program students were advised to consume RED items, such as chips, in moderation and to monitor their consumption of AMBER items including muffins, juice, icecream and pies. The amount of RED and AMBER items offered was greatly reduced from the menu previously offered. The program promotes the consumption of GREEN items such as sandwiches, salads, water and milk. The selection of these healthy items is much greater than the selection of RED and AMBER items. Pittwater House has found the program extremely successful in promoting healthy eating for students of all ages on campus.

— **supplied by Pittwater House Schools**

School snapshot — no couch potatoes here!

Prairiewood High School, in Sydney's southwestern suburbs, places great importance on healthy lifestyles and fitness education, which shows in the fitness program — part of the activities program for the school.

Apart from the mandated delivery of sport, health and personal development programs from Years 7 to 10, students readily take up Sport Science in Years 9 and 10 as elective studies. In Years 11 and 12, PD/Health/PE is a strongly supported HSC subject along with 2-Unit Sport, and Lifestyles and Recreation. A significant number of students go on to post-school occupations that are health-related, especially PD/Health/PE teaching.

The popularity of such courses has much to do with a very focused and dedicated staff, both in PD/Health/PE and beyond, who commit themselves to ongoing programs of sports such as rugby union, indoor and field soccer, volleyball, Oz Tag, indoor and field cricket, hockey, AFL, and lawn bowls — and that's for both boys and girls!

The school and its P&C financially support its elite athletes who have been increasingly participating at higher and higher levels of competition.

The engagement of students in these programs is so high that by the end of the year when most programs are winding up, Prairiewood HS students are turning up to school at 7.15 each morning and doing sprints and special fitness routines with healthy breakfast as part of a planned program of fitness delivered by staff from the PD/Health, PE faculty.

In 2003, its first year, only 42 students attended. In 2004, more than 80 students took part including some Year 6 elite athletes from its feeder school, William Stimson Public School. These very dedicated young people took part in the program as part of the school's primary links program.

At the end of the course of eight weeks, the high school students graduated and were fit enough to be treated to a rigorous day out at Manly Beach where they underwent surf training with specialist surf personnel. ■

— **by Denise Smith, Prairiewood High School**