

Conversation Corner

With Neal Spruce



apex

A Newsletter for Fitness Professionals

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Back to School With a New Menu

Common sense tells us what to feed our kids, so you don't need me, or other more complicated sources, to tell you what foods to serve your children. But to deliver healthier foods, we are up against many seemingly insurmountable obstacles in today's world—including, but not limited to, fast food outlets that are designed to lure children—and other readily available less healthy foods or beverages from vending machines, cafeterias or the ubiquitous quick stop stores.

In the beginning

Ironically, the School Food (lunch) Programs, which started around the Great Depression era, were designed to feed the malnourished with the purpose of national security by safeguarding the health and well-being of the nation's children and to encourage the consumption of nutritious foods. Unfortunately, school food programs have now evolved to contribute to the consumption of unhealthy fattening foods. To remedy this, Congress passed the 1996 "School Meals Initiative for Healthy Meals," which stated that school lunches should supply 1/3rd of the RDA for calories, protein, specific vitamins and minerals, and no more than 30% fat. A recent survey of schools determined that, 10 years later, virtually none of them have met the guidelines. Somehow we have badly blown both the initial and subsequent "remedy" objectives. I don't think anything will change soon, so *we as parents must take the breakfast and lunch program back and put as much as we can under our control.*

Nutrition and academics

We certainly know that eating breakfast can improve students' academics and attention span and contribute positively to weight control, (see May '05 newsletter).

Cognitive test scores are higher in adolescent breakfast eaters than non-breakfast consumers. At the very least, chronic breakfast skipping may have a negative impact on ones overall nutritional status based on years of omitting valuable breakfast-type nutrients and the fact that the body/brain is continually going undernourished for extended periods of time.

So what about daily *overall* nutrition? Children with substandard daily diets find it difficult to produce academic performance equal to their counterparts who consume diets that come closer to the suggested RDA. In a well-designed study by Schoenthaler et. al., children using a multivitamin and mineral supplement (MV) that raised their nutrient intake to the equivalent of a well-balanced diet, increased their I.Q. compared to the placebo group by an average of 2.5 points. In 1/5th of the participants, the MV raised their I.Q. 16 points, presumably because this group of children ate a poorer diet.

A sad, growing story (no pun intended)

Childhood obesity, or simply being overweight, is a sad, growing story. Nineteen percent of children are overweight, and that percentage is growing faster than the rapidly increasing number of overweight adults. In fact, the term *adult onset diabetes*—which is almost 100% self-inflicted from excessive food consumption and increase body fat—is no longer used by most doctors/scientists because the

disease now exists in the youth population. Yep, we created a new childhood disease by surrounding ourselves with highly palatable foods and limiting physical activity. The food part is what I like to term *foods that allow the parent or schools to take the path of least resistance*. In other words, we continually cave in to what kids want in order to make life easier, offering a reward, or simply getting some calories down their throat because once or twice a long time ago they didn't eat the healthier meals you served them so you gave up.

In essence, we are letting *kids* design the program. I have news for you; they are not qualified! Most eating habits are formed during childhood. Thus, children will become adults and 9 out of 10 adults will be overweight at some point in their lives (Nov. '05 newsletter). Many will become sick or die from the increasing body fat, causing not only serious emotional damage, but further burdening our fragile healthcare system and choking our economy (see May '06 newsletter). Welcome to the 21st Century and don't worry when your body fat gets out of control causing disease, we can still keep you alive with surgery, drugs and/or by attaching you to machines.

More bleak statistics: Replacing the good with the bad

Increasingly, milk is being replaced by the better marketed and addicting soft drinks. In the average school child, a 1-oz decline in milk consumption results in 4.2-oz increase in soft drink intake, a net gain of 31 calories, and a loss of 34-mg of calcium. Do the long-term math. Many/most children drink one to two 12-oz soft drinks daily!

Brown baggers vs. school food/lunch eaters

School lunch eaters consume ~40-120 more calories each school day than children who pack a lunch. School lunch eaters also have higher obesity rates than their brown bag counterparts when all else is equal. Now consider that the doubling (6-11 yrs) and tripling (11-18 yrs) in obesity rates of our youth since 1980 is caused by a calorie imbalance of ~100-150 calories/day (this number look familiar?) with most of it coming from an increase in snacking, *not* from less activity or super-sizing. Snacking is directly related to greater access to foods, primarily through the increase in vending machines on campuses.

What parents are competing against: The Vending Machine Monster

These "child magnets" generally house highly palatable and less expensive foods which offer little nutritional value. They not only take the place of healthier foods, they contribute far more calories than the same volume of a healthier choice (e.g., an 80 calorie apple vs. a 200 calorie candy bar or soda). Students use vending foods for their entire lunch or worse: supplement their lunch with the additional calories only because the machine is there calling them—especially if they missed breakfast.

School funding, i.e. money

We are competing against corporate America money that helps fund our schools. Entire school districts have come to rely on income from

vending machines profits and the companies that stock them. The big soda companies have contracts with schools that give the businesses exclusive *pouring rights*. These corporations pay big money to schools for this privilege while fully admitting that the purpose of the lucrative contracts is to establish a brand loyalty as the children age.

In Texas for example, an average annual income from vending contracts (not including vending profits) is ~\$2.7 million per district. Many of the pouring rights contracts contain provisions to increase the percentage of profits schools receive when sales volumes increase, thus creating a powerful incentive for schools to promote soft drinks over healthier foods that might be sold in the cafeterias. Talk about a conflict of interest. Not only are schools competing against their own lunch programs, but as a center for learning, they are supposed to teach children about health and related foods. Yet the schools offer and promote the opposite for the money.

Outdated reward systems (we are all part of the problem)

At some point we have to stop making the *popular* food/snack decisions and make wise decisions instead. Popular food decisions let kids design the menus, which can't work because they only live for the moment (i.e. no long-term thought process as to accruing consequences). Children will simply tell you they want what all humans have evolved to want related to taste: foods or fluids that contain high levels of sodium, sugars and fat.

We foster and perpetuate a child's affinity for junk foods. What kind of message registers with kids when we teach them which foods are healthy (e.g. fruits, veggies, lean meats, etc.) but give them fast foods, sweets or non-nutritional sodas as rewards? In essence we are saying, "Good boy. Here is some food that will contribute to your future bad eating habits and the more I give you, the faster you will get 'addicted' so that your waistline will grow each year. By the way, eat the whole thing and would you like another one? And if you do well at something again, I will give you more of this unhealthy food that we know is bad for you, because I love you." Why don't we just shove a cigarette in our kids' mouths when they're good?

One last point to bear in mind is that junk food is designed by food scientists who understand the human's innate cravings (sugar, fat and sodium) and that we are "wired" to desire these foods that are crafted to grow a business—not to keep us healthy.

Out of sight, out of mouth

Combining all factors: The human addiction to specific tastes, children unaware or indifferent to future consequences, daily increases in fat stores that are virtually unnoticeable and completely tolerated, low cost energy supply (junk foods are less expensive than healthier calories), convenience (no prep time), perceived time constraints (e.g., it's been demonstrated that children would rather sleep in than wait to be served or prepare and eat breakfast or wait in lunch lines)—along with allowing easy access to heavily marketed high calorie, low nutritious foods—and you have the perfect recipe for our children to begin down the path of continuous weight gain.

If you don't give children access, whether at home or school, they will make other choices and actually begin to develop a taste for healthier fare. As parents, we just have to hang in there and wait until we hear for the first time, "Dad (or mom), I really like this broccoli," or, "Can we have chicken tonight instead of McDonalds." Trust me, it will happen. You just have to be strong (not always popular) by thinking, "I want my child to grow up fit with a strong mind and body that can stave off most of today's adult diseases and allow her/him to surpass my humble successes." If we start now while they're young and gen-

erally lean, we have a better chance of success because it's far easier to prevent weight gain while kids are active than reverse it once they become adults—look around.

So what can we do now?

Fighting the school food system isn't easy but we can't wait for it to change. Here's a list of things you can implement, starting from simple tasks and ending with what might be more difficult to incorporate:

- You have to care—care that your kids will outlive you and live well.
 - Caring is "cheap" and a non-activity. Virtually all parents want what's best for their kids, but caring enough to put it into action is the key.
- Make them eat breakfast no matter how much time is available. It solves for vending machine snacking and other poor choices because they would otherwise be starving from not having food since dinner the night before (15-18 hrs!).
 - Little time: bowl of cereal with milk (or equivalent source of protein, vitamin D and calcium); bread/toast with milk, egg with milk
 - No time: Apex breakfast square, snack bar or Apex Workout Shake. All can be consumed on the move and have everything they need to get started.
- Give them milk or a nutritionally equivalent food twice daily along with an Apex multivitamin/mineral.
 - Not an excuse to eat poorly, only an insurance policy.
- If the school offers "competitive foods" (i.e. vending junk or an open campus allowing trips to fast food stores/outlets), brown bag it because you can put in healthy snacks that actually taste good.
 - Use Apex chips and bars to complement a good sandwich
- Restrict access to high-calorie, low-nutrition foods, at least at home because it's everywhere else.
 - Convenience and access are part of a child's decision making, so make better food available and bad stuff a chore to acquire
- Adopt a different reward system than junk food or trips to fast food restaurants.
 - Go out for a meal but order healthy (kids just like going out), use movies, games, money or something you know your child wants.
- Make your child your food partner in a way that each makes sure you have done something right for the day.
 - Quiz each other regarding food choices when appropriate.
 - Find something that motivates your child and give her/him the responsibility to help themselves eat correctly (tied to the incentive) by directing you what to serve. You will be amazed at the outcome.
 - I give my youth football team menus that lay out their food planning for the entire season, including pre-practice and game meals and timing. They always tell the parents, "Coach Neal says so we have to do it," and the parents truly respond because it's coming from the kids with passion and motivation.

Well that's it. We can't wait for the government, schools or someone else to save our children's health and their future. We have everything we need within the Apex resources to get the job started and completed. Now all you need is to look at your child and make the decision: Do I want her/him to grow up like *the typical adult*, or the person I have always dreamed they could be and truly want them to be. It's your call—I made mine.

Neal