**The Food Habits of Healthy Children**

**Source : RujutaDiwekar**

My son doesn’t want to eat anything", “I don’t want my daughter to eat too much and have the same (weight) issues. The issue is exacerbated by a globalization of our diets. All these factors can have serious repercussions across strata and age group. The way forward is to change how we look at food as both parents and children and cooking and eating as a family. One of the ways to do this is by involving children in the kitchen, having them set the table, taking them to farms to understand where their food comes from. These exercises will allow them to look beyond the marketing gimmicks of the food industry, and connect them to the soil and create appreciation for the food system and a commitment to good health that will last a lifetime.

**As obesity is a growing problem in India, how can parents prevent the creation of what you call the “obesogenic environment" in the book?**

I believe childhood obesity is a policy failure rather than a personal or parenting failure. Currently, in India we have the highest number of malnourished kids and the second highest number of obese kids. You get there by having policies that subsidize fertilizers but don’t support native, natural farming efforts or create market linkages between rural and urban India. We should hold our politicians responsible and accountable for poor planning of cities, lack of local produce in our markets and shrinking green spaces. As parents, it is important to say no every time your child asks for a chocolate for finishing all the food on their plate. As a household, it is important to adopt certain habits. Don’t have a fridge stocked with aerated drinks or packaged juices, or watch TV while eating. Another important point is to speak to your children in their local, native language. This is the language that our grandmothers spoke and is one of love and compassion—a language that should extend into food and trump the narrative of fear and caution.

**How does one tackle the problem of underweight and malnourished children especially among the less privileged sections of society?**

There was a time when India’s poor were not victims of obesity and non-communicable diseases but that’s no longer the case. With packets of ultra-processed foods like chips and chocolates available for ₹ 5, the poor and the lower middle class is fast getting fat. Good nutrition is easily achievable and obesity is preventable if there’s government will and push for the right policies. The return of millets and value creation for the neglected and underutilized species of fruits and vegetables of every region of India will go a long way in preventing malnourishment. For all my ranting about what governments do wrong, the *anganwadi* (rural childcare centre) programme is a huge success and a shining example of the impact that policies can achieve when backed with political will. In the Sonave village of Palghar district, near Mumbai, we run a programme that sends *ragi kheer* to about 500 kids in *anganwadis* and hope to cover many more in the coming months. Private and public partnership with government officials working as facilitators has worked wonders for the region and I believe this is scalable if the government is able to find genuine partners in other regions of India.

**The way children eat has changed with the growth of nuclear households where both parents are working. How can one ensure efficient as well as healthy cooking within this setup?**

Cooking at home saves both time and money in the long term by preventing obesity and all the diseases that follow that condition. We need to understand that cooking isn’t the chore that it is made out to be. One of the reasons why we undervalue cooking is because we take very little interest in the local, seasonal produce. The other big change that India is waiting for is for our men to enter the kitchen. They need to contribute to sourcing, cooking and serving food in their homes. I often say this to people, everyone had a grandfather who could cook, a father who would go out and do the daily shopping for fresh fruit and veggies.

**What about the role of ‘ghee’ and milk in a child’s diet?**

Both ghee and milk are among the *panchamrits* (a purifying mix of five foods used in Hindu worship) of our country and are therapeutic in nature. Cattle is an intrinsic part of a farmer’s ecosystem and they are raised like family but because of our disconnect with farming life, a lot of us believe that cows are being tortured for milk production. And while that is true of industrialized milk suppliers, it is far removed from the truth for a majority of Indian farmers. Buy milk from a local dairy or source from a local farm and let the child drink it only if she enjoys the taste of it. For dietary requirements of calcium, protein and other nutrients, a wholesome diet devoid of milk can meet that too and quite easily. So don’t use malted chocolate powders to get the kid to gulp down milk. And don’t give them almond milk, etc., to compensate for not liking milk either. Also, know that desi ghee is lactose free. So if the kid has a weak gut or immunity, both ghee and butter can help in healing that.

**Is there anything that can be acceptable as junk food for a child?**

All Indian delicacies that are made at home can be enjoyed freely and they shouldn’t be counted as junk just because they are fried or have sugar. And as far as even pure junk food goes, the stuff that you can buy off markets or chains too is okay as long as it’s not offered as a treat or is perceived as an aspirational food item. This is true even for fat-free ice cream, flourless pizza or sugar-free chocolates. The thing is that junk doesn’t get healthy because some nutrient is added to it and fresh, seasonal produce, cooked in our kitchens, doesn’t become junk because of a particular food group or nutrient in it. When it comes to food, there is no room for guilt, it should be all about gratitude and common sense.

**How much can a child participate in the food choices they are presented with?**

I have a chapter in my book about the involvement of kids in food sourcing, cooking and eating. Involving children in the kitchen, having them set the table, taking them to farms, letting them touch leaves, fruit, roots, is an engaging and positive exercise. It’s an enabler; an educative and empowering experience which allows them to see through cheap marketing gimmicks of the food industry and allows them to make choices in tune with time-tested ways of staying healthy. The whole point is to adopt a more sensible, simple and sustainable lifestyle as a family and to take it a day at a time. Don’t expect an overnight change but if you keep at it long enough, the change will be a liberating and irreversible one.

**Five ideas for school snacks**

Banana is always a great idea even on days your child feels like skipping lunch in school, containing enough nutrients to equip them for the long day.

Roti, *jaggery* and ghee are rich in iron and minerals and are quick go-to snacks for the long ride back home or post a sports class.

Homemade *laddoos* made with *aliv* (garden cress seeds), *jaggery* and coconut ensure that moods don’t swing and energy levels don’t drop.

*Nimbu* sherbet with a little ginger, *kesar* (saffron) and black pepper is great for the stomach and works as an antidote to digestion and fatigue that dehydration can set in.

Homemade *chakli*, *mathri* and *chivda* are healthy options that leave your children well nourished for all their daily tasks.

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