Helping Kids Eat Better

Hurrah! I’ve been waiting for this day since the mid-1970s. Junk food is on its way out of schools! Last September, the U.S. Department of Agriculture dramatically improved the nutritional quality of federally subsidized school meals when it required schools to add more fruits and vegetables, use bread and other grain products that are at least 50 percent whole grain, get rid of artificial trans fat, and steadily lower sodium.

Then in June, as a result of the 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, the USDA gave schools one year to ensure that all the foods sold outside of subsidized meals—both in cafeterias and school hallways—contain actual food (like vegetables, milk, and whole grains). That will be coupled with limits on salt, sugar, and other nutrients. I’m proud that CSPI’s nutrition policy director, Margo Wootan, led the push for the new law and regulations. (CSPI is the nonprofit publisher of Nutrition Action.)

While it was the tripling of childhood obesity since 1980 that provided the impetus for the improvements in school fare, healthier foods also will help prevent tooth decay, high blood pressure, and other diet-related problems. And children who are accustomed to eating more plant-based meals, whole grains, and less salty foods won’t have to learn new habits as adults.

But if we want to turn out healthy kids, we have to do even more.

■ At home. Parents need to keep as much junk food out of the home (and their kids’ hands) as possible. And they need to teach their children the basics of preparing meals. Youngsters who can’t cook will have to rely on food companies and restaurants for the rest of their lives. Need recipe ideas? Pick up a copy of Sally Sampson’s beautiful new cookbook, ChopChop: The Kids’ Guide to Cooking Real Food with Your Family, which is loaded with fun and (mostly) healthy recipes. (Thanks to Sally for publicizing Food Day—October 24—in ChopChop magazine.)

■ In schools. Since many parents don’t cook, let’s make sure that every child gets age-appropriate lessons in school. Cooking is a fun, hands-on activity that nicely balances the reading, writing, and arithmetic. And while they’re at it, schools could teach kids how to garden.

■ In corporate boardrooms. The food industry isn’t an innocent bystander. Why don’t fruit and vegetable producers mount humorous ad campaigns to tempt kids with the taste and texture of bell peppers and crisp apples?

And the industry also could be doing less—less advertising of unhealthy foods on TV and wherever else kids congregate.

■ In Washington & state capitals. The federal government and the states need to pressure companies to stop marketing unhealthy foods—sugary breakfast cereals, cheeseburgers on white buns, and fatty, salty pizzas—to children, and to make healthy meals the standard kids’ meals at restaurants. Since Congress prevented the government from issuing even voluntary guidance on food marketing two years ago, this would be the time for the President and First Lady to use their bully pulpit and demand that companies do the right thing.

C’mon! It’s our kids we’re talking about.

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Companies need to stop marketing unhealthy foods to kids.

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