

Ban Aunt Jemima? That's just fine. Her image is not politically correct (and I've always preferred homemade pancakes and real maple syrup anyway). Joe Camel, as cigarette promoter, I am glad became extinct. But must we bury Betty Crocker before her time, just because her baked goods are high sugar? And Tony the Tiger, who I grew up believing was GREAAAAT, in spite of the sugar coating on his Frosted Flakes? And Toucan Sam of Fruit Loop fame? Must we part with them all, desperate to halt the obesity epidemic, to take control of our kids' climbing BMIs?

I'm reacting to the recent NY Times article on the government's plan for *voluntary* principles for food manufacturers, regarding advertising products to children. (<http://nyti.ms/lxO60F>) Make foods healthier or stop advertising them to kids, is the message. "The guidelines call for foods that are advertised to children to meet two basic requirements. They would have to include certain healthful ingredients, like whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, or low-fat milk. And they could not contain unhealthful amounts of sugar, saturated fat, trans fat and salt."

Scott Faber, representing food makers, said that "...ads for packaged foods on television shows aimed at children 2 to 11 had dropped significantly since 2004, and that the ads more often showed healthier types of foods." Yet based on CDC data, obesity rates among kids nearly tripled since 1980, and continues to climb <http://1.usa.gov/kmdWbN> .

Hmmm, something just doesn't add up. Maybe it's not the ads that are the problem, but the number of hours sitting around watching TV and playing video games that's an issue!

But what if we did limit these useless foods being fed to our kids? Seems harmless enough. I mean, what harm is there in *not* having these items around, of omitting them from our kids' diets?

Not so fast. Before we ban all things deemed *unhealthy* and we start setting criteria for labeling foods as healthy enough to be advertised to kids, consider the consequences. Here's what I fear will happen:

Inadvertently, we will stigmatize foods as good versus bad. And the last thing we need is more black and white rules. They make no sense, and they certainly don't resolve the issues for a culture struggling with making peace with food and an inability to manage weight.

Take Jane, an adolescent who came to see me 2 weeks ago for weight management. Referred by her pediatrician, accompanied by her mother, I learned some interesting things in our one-hour session. This articulate 15 year old described the "perfect" home environment. Mom cooks nightly, providing the healthiest of meals. Full of vegetables and whole grains, containing lean protein, her dinners were nothing short of wholesome. Second portions were never an issue, as Jane didn't care much for the foods that were served. But she made the most of it.

When asked if she liked baked goods and ice cream Jane replied shyly that she did—but that she never had them at home. These were banned as unhealthy. The result is that Jane eats more than her share of these items whenever she has the opportunity—when she is out with friends, or at a party— regardless of how hungry she is. It is "now or never" thinking.

It's like the Halloween candy phenomena (<http://bit.ly/bjTtFT>). Restricting these items fails to achieve the intended goal and as I've seen, makes for an unhealthy relationship with food.

Now I'm a parent, too. And while my kids are *way* past the age where I can control their food choices, I do recall that time. So what did I do when confronted with their request to eat what their peers were eating (and what was being advertised to them on TV

and at eye level at the supermarket)? How did I balance my need to provide a healthy diet, while minimizing conflict around food? And, maintain a healthy relationship with eating?

I didn't restrict their ad exposure, although I limited TV time so that they would use their bodies to be active and their minds to create through reading and play. There were no TVs in their bedrooms, and all meals and snacks were eaten at the kitchen or dining room table. The only one in our home who could eat his snack in his den was my dog, Mica, who would grab his biscuit and eat it in his bed. No such luck for the kids, though.

But when they *did* view television ads, I'd make a point of educating them to be critical thinkers. I would share with them that high sugar cereal may be called a healthy breakfast, but it's like eating candy for breakfast. We'd discuss how perhaps that cereal would make a good sweet snack to have with a glass of milk, instead of eating cookies, if they preferred. Or I would point out how they were being tricked by the ad's information, teaching them to be more critical viewers of the media and to not be manipulated by savvy messages and messengers.

When they were young, I'd offer the high sugar cereal as a mix in with a healthier, lower sugar cereal choice. For instance, Frosted Flakes mixed in with corn flakes, or a small serving of Fruit Loops mixed in with Cheerios. This achieved many goals. It minimized conflict and prevented categorizing foods as acceptable and forbidden. And, it kept their intake rather healthy, despite inclusion of small amounts of sweetened items. And now as adults, I see them choosing lower sugar, healthier selections. And stopping when they've had enough to eat, even of such favorites as white flour, fiber-less bagels.

What about the idea of allowing food manufacturers to target kids if their product were healthier? Specifically, if it had 8 grams or

less of sugar, or contained a certain level of whole grains or capped the sodium content? Good intentions, but here's what I fear. If it were limited to 8 grams of sugar as proposed, that eliminates much added fruit (including raisins) in the cereal. Yes, fruit is naturally high in sugar (24 grams in ¼ cup of raisins), and there's nothing wrong with including it generously in your diet! And I can imagine that foods will be filled with diet sweeteners, as a means to lower the evil sugar content. I suspect most parents may not want to be pumping their kids with diet products throughout the day.

Chocolate chip cookies would hardly fit, based on the planned guidelines. But should they be eliminated from our diet? If you've read enough of the posts on this blog you certainly know where I stand on this.

Kids, like adults, need to learn balance. They need to appreciate it as they get older and become independent. They need to learn that while a food itself may not be nutritionally rich, it's important to have enjoyment from what we eat, regardless of where you are on the BMI chart! A food may not be so balanced by itself (for instance, it may be relatively high in sodium), but as part of a meal it may fit just fine. Perhaps what can change is that kids (and their parents) will consider their portion of pizza, but won't eliminate it because of its high salt and low fiber content. Rather, they'll include a glass of low fat milk at the meal and serve some veggies with it.

I write this post as both a mother, and as an RD—one who sees obese kids, and eating disordered children and adults. Let's be careful to not replace one health epidemic, obesity, with disordered eating.

What was your experience as a child? And how do you approach this issue with *your* kids? Comments welcome!