



Raising healthy eaters

Helping children to make the right food choices when they are small, advises **Gillian Riley**, will inspire them to go for the healthy option in adulthood, too

For the past two decades I have run seminars for people who struggle with overeating or smoking addictions. What I have learned from these is that the people who come to me for help, especially those who have the greatest difficulty, were not taught one very simple principle – how to make choices – during their childhood years. They can learn it as adults, though, and when they do it makes a huge difference to what they are aiming to achieve.

The practice of making choices can be described as the ability to delay gratification, and to do it with pleasure, so it doesn't feel like a deprivation. By delaying gratification I am not talking about saving 'treats' for later – although sometimes that could be part of it. Real progress comes from leaving out some 'treats' entirely for the delayed gratification of, for example, sustained energy, improved mood or simply an empowering sense of self-control. This is crucial, because if we can't delay gratification at least sometimes, we are compelled to eat anything that takes our fancy. And many people do exactly that!

When we are born we are unable to delay gratification at all. Whatever an infant might want, they can only want it *now!* However, it is entirely possible for an adult to choose delayed over instant gratification, passing on over-indulgences in return for not feeling bloated or nauseous later on. This is a sophisticated concept, and something even many adults never grasp; and

it is certainly beyond the intellectual capacity of very young children.

You wouldn't expect a toddler to go out and earn their own living, and in the same way you wouldn't expect a toddler to make complex decisions about longer-term health benefits and what is wise to eat. However, at some point you hope your child is going to make a living for themselves, and is going to eat wisely and in moderation throughout their life. And so, as a parent, you hope to point them in that direction.

A crucial key is to encourage a strong sense of personal choice. This can only be developed over many years, preferably throughout childhood, and it is important to understand that *it is not an automatic, inevitable part of growing up.*

The process of choosing for ourselves is carried out in a particular area of the prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain that lies just behind the forehead. Research at the University of London using neuro-imaging technology shows that this area is not used at all when people simply follow orders or instructions. This part of the prefrontal cortex is accessed *only when people make decisions for themselves.*

Neuroscientists also know that extreme physical damage to this area leaves people incapable of making decisions. They tend to look only at the immediate reward of a situation without considering the ramifications that might lead from a particular decision. Our brains are not fully formed when we are born, and the prefrontal cortex especially needs to develop through human interactions during childhood and even into the late teens and early 20s. Young brains need the right kind of stimulation: lots ▶



of love, of course, and the right kind of guidance.

A dictatorial "do as I say" does nothing to support this process. Recent research at the University of Boston compared different kinds of parenting styles to see the impact on overeating in children. The study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, concluded that children were five times more likely to become obese if they had authoritarian parents, described as "strict disciplinarians". These parents gave orders such as: "You have to do this" and "You are not allowed to do that." They were not encouraging their children to make choices of their own.

This same study found that providing no boundaries at all, with a "do whatever you want" philosophy, wasn't the answer, either. Parenting styles described as "permissive" or "neglectful" were also shown to result in overeating in the children. These parents, too, weren't getting their children to exercise their prefrontal cortex.

The parenting style that proved best in creating healthy eating and normal weight in children was described as "authoritative". This combined sensitivity towards the child, together with what the researchers described as "clear expectations about self-control".

Practising choice-making isn't necessarily just about food. A good example could be giving your child the option of doing their homework now and watching a favourite TV programme later. If the child plays around and avoids the homework, they are not allowed to watch the programme. Then, a week later, the same situation arises and the child, feeling reluctant to get down to the work, remembers what is at stake and chooses to do things differently. They do their homework and get to see their programme. They have chosen to delay their gratification. They have strengthened their prefrontal cortex and this, in turn, makes it more likely to be used again. Then, they will be more able to contemplate wider implications of their actions beyond immediate, impulsive automaticity (automatic or involuntary action).

Learning to choose isn't simply an intellectual understanding. You could point out that a certain kind of food is unhealthy and explain why, but this does very little to further the choice-making process. If someone isn't genuinely able to choose for themselves, they might comply with nutritional advice temporarily, but sooner or later they will rebel against it. The rebellion can show up as an excessive attraction to 'forbidden' foods, even obsession, and ultimately lots of overeating, accompanied by every justification under the sun.

Choice-making should be reinforced patiently and repetitively: do one thing and such-and-such will happen; do something different and you get a different result. Encourage the child to choose, and to notice the results of the choice they make, preferably without any blame or judgement. Just



In a bid to tackle childhood obesity, nearly 100 pupils from Newport secondary schools were invited to take part in a fitness and healthy eating event at the University of Wales, Newport. The aim of Fit for Fun was to encourage pupils to be more active and incorporate healthy eating into their daily lives. The youngsters had a great time trying out a variety of fitness sessions and health checks planned at the University's Sports Centre, including basketball, badminton and heart rate tests. They also had a lesson in healthy and not-so-healthy foods.



simply, "This is what you chose," and leave it at that.

Of course it is easier to start how you mean to continue, and the biggest challenge is to change horses mid-stream when you have already got an extremely rebellious teenager on your hands. As many parents know, coercion and intimidation are counter-productive. It can be difficult to suddenly switch to asking them what they truly want for themselves and in what ways, if any, you can support them to make the changes they want.

The best start with an infant is not to introduce manufactured foods – especially anything containing sugar – on a daily basis. At least while you have more say over what they eat, and before they can go out and buy their own snacks. Make sugar a rare treat, just for birthdays, for example. I will come clean and admit that I have not raised any children of my own, but parents who didn't introduce sugar early on tell me that their kids didn't miss what they didn't know about.

Sugar is highly addictive. Our culture tends to see it as benign, even healthy. But, you know, whole cultures can be wrong about things! Most people don't get their youngsters hooked on cigarettes, caffeine or alcohol, and it is wise to regard sugar with the same caution. Once children get into sugar, because of its addictive nature, they will tend to prefer it to real food. It has a massive effect on little bodies and brains, so they can get hooked very easily.

Some people become confused about this, thinking 'sugar deprivation' amounts to being authoritarian. Perhaps you can simply not buy it and bring it into the house while they are young enough. As the parent your role is to provide guidance – you wouldn't hand them a box of matches to see if they will

WI MEMBERS VOICE THEIR CONCERN

Emphasising a longstanding history of commitment to improving the nation's diet and health, at their AGM in 2003, WI members passed the following resolution by an overwhelming majority:

"This meeting views with concern the increase in obesity and diet-related health problems in children, and the associated risk of chronic disease in later life, and urges HM Government to regulate the promotion to children of foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet and to ensure increased opportunities for exercise and practical food education in schools."

burn the house down, would you? You create safe boundaries and then support them to make choices within those boundaries.

How this is done depends on the child's age. For very young children a star system works well: stars can be placed on a chart when their veggies are eaten, adding up to a new toy, for example. Then, as children get older, they can choose between two or three kinds of vegetables available. Perhaps you could suggest that they save up their pocket money to spend on music or clothing instead of daily sweets.

Promote the very enticing benefits of a sugar-free diet: fewer nightmares and emotional meltdowns for little ones, less acne for teenagers, plus better academic and sport performance for both. Anything you can do to get your children to choose anything for themselves will be invaluable, especially when the consequences of their choices can be acknowledged – lovingly, firmly and fairly consistently.

There is a common myth in our culture that can get in the way of supporting healthy eating in children. This is the notion that, if left alone, children's bodies will naturally cause them to want the food they really need. So they might eat some sugary stuff for a while but eventually return to the vegetables and fruit that meet their nutritional needs. There is a great deal of research that strongly suggests this does not, in fact, happen.

Our bodies evolved hundreds of thousands of years ago and had no need to distinguish between real food and manufactured rubbish until relatively recently. For the same reason, giant sea turtles can't tell the difference between jellyfish and plastic bags. So they eat plastic bags and often die as a result. This is not so far away from what is going on with a great many humans and their food in the Western world these days.

What could save us is our very human, decision-making prefrontal cortex... If only we know how to use it. 🐼



Gillian Riley is a teacher and counsellor who specialises in helping people who overeat to overcome the psychological barriers that fuel their addictive behaviour. You can learn more about her Eating Less seminars and courses by visiting the website (www.eatingless.com). *Eating Less: Say Goodbye to Overeating* by Gillian Riley is published by Vermilion at £7.99.