

# A PROACTIVE APPROACH AGAINST JUNK FOOD

Nadia Bazinet M.A. | Educational consultant, author and designer

**A**s part of a workshop entitled *Relaxation pour les tout-petits et saines habitudes alimentaires : des outils pour la vie* [relaxation for infants and healthy eating habits: tools for life], a workshop I gave at the 2008 congresses of the AQEP, AEPO and QPAT\*\*, I shared with preschool and primary teachers the outcome of my thinking and observations as a mother, teacher, author and university supervisor. I told them that my initial thoughts had focussed on the importance of helping children effectively manage their stress by teaching them relaxation techniques. Afterwards, at the core of this process, I had no choice but to seriously consider the major challenges to be met in terms of the eating habits we pass on to children every day, beginning with the example we set for them in our own kitchens...

I therefore began to do research into what children eat, with a view to going beyond the current intense media coverage of junk food; I was able to find some interesting studies that led me not only to think about the problem but also to confirm that obesity among children is much more than simply something everyone is talking about. In fact, childhood obesity can be described as a global problem and – excuse the bad pun – one that is growing up. Here are a few numbers that speak for themselves.

In 2004, a broad study of eating patterns conducted throughout the United States, which included 3,022 children aged 4 to 24 months, reached the following conclusions:

- One out of every four babies ate french fries once a day; french fries came in third among the most frequently consumed “vegetables”;
- From 20% to 27% of babies ate hot dogs, sausages and various types of cured meat before the age of 12 months;
- From 18% to 33% of babies did not eat vegetables each day;
- From 23% to 33% of babies did not eat fruit each day;
- 70% of babies ate a sweetened dessert at least once a day<sup>1</sup>.

This study clearly demonstrated that the eating patterns for infants and toddlers from the age of seven months generally resemble that of older children and adults.

\*\* AQEP (Association québécoise des enseignantes et des enseignants du primaire), AEPO (Association d'éducation préscolaire du Québec) and QPAT (Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers)

<sup>1</sup> “Feeding infants and toddlers study: What foods are infants and toddlers eating?”, *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, [Online], Vol. 104, No. 1, p. S22-S30, 2004. [<http://www.adajournal.org/article/PIIS0002822303014913/abstract>].

## Childhood obesity, a world epidemic?

The situation in Canada resembles that of our neighbours to the south. This was clearly demonstrated in March 2007 in the *Report of the Standing Committee on Health* of the House of Commons, which showed that 26% of young Canadians aged 2 to 17 years were overweight or obese and that this percentage was almost twice as high as 20 years ago. The report reached the following conclusion: The life expectancy of young Canadians is shorter than for their parents<sup>2</sup>. According to the World Health Organization, this situation is found in most industrialized countries, and the WHO unhesitatingly speaks of infantile obesity as a world epidemic whose repercussions need to be curbed urgently<sup>3</sup>.

## The major battles against junk food: Possible solutions

In its report, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health wants Canada to reverse this trend by the Vancouver Olympic Games in 2010. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, the Standing Committee made various recommendations to the federal government:

- Establish a comprehensive public awareness campaign, mainly for parents, who, according to the report, do not know that their children are overweight.
- Require labelling on the front of food packages rather than on the back, as is currently often the case.
- Limit the use of trans fats.

In parallel to this, an intensive campaign was introduced in the United States. The mission of the campaign, called The Global Dump Soft Drinks Campaign, is to encourage the reduced intake of sugar-based soft drinks, in addition to all other drinks containing sugar, to improve the health and diet of American children<sup>4</sup>. In Quebec, there was talk of introducing a policy to restrict the installation of fast food dispensers on school property<sup>5</sup>. In short, there is no shortage of good ideas or good intentions. There is unanimous agreement: we need to act now!

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Standing Committee on Health*, downloaded from the Nouvelles de Radio-Canada Web site on Wednesday, March 28, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Obesity – Preventing and Managing the Global Epidemic*, [Online]. [[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_894.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894.pdf)], [[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_894\\_\(part1\).pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894_(part1).pdf)], [[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_894\\_\(part2\).pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894_(part2).pdf)], [[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_894\\_\(part3\).pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894_(part3).pdf)], [[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_894\\_\(part4\).pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894_(part4).pdf)], [[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_894\\_\(part5\).pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_894_(part5).pdf)].

<sup>4</sup> For more information: [Online]. [<http://www.dumpsoda.org/>].

<sup>5</sup> La Coalition québécoise sur la problématique du poids, [Online]. [<http://www.cqpp.qc.ca/>].



### Is the secret of a winning formula to conduct a battle?

What if the solution was not simply to conduct a major battle against fast/junk food, but also, and in particular, to take a proactive approach? My experience as a facilitator of cooking workshops with pre-school and primary-age children has convinced me that this is the way to go. Children love to cook... and to eat well as a result. We have kept children out of the kitchen for too long: in doing so, we have kept them from eating well. There are many children who think that pineapple grows with a hole in the middle... and that brown eggs are whole wheat eggs. We have collectively developed a phobia about cooking with children because we assume that there are too many dangers, such as cutting themselves, burning themselves or making a mess.... The end result is that we deprive them of the fun of cooking and deprive ourselves of greater satisfaction. Talk about it with teachers and parents who aren't afraid to do so and who make a place for children in the kitchen: there is nothing more gratifying than hearing a child say: I made it myself!

### Communicating the pleasure of cooking and the art of living associated with it!

In the United Kingdom, a young cook by the name of Jamie Oliver started his career on a scooter... in a television program that had him visiting his friends to cook healthy food for them. He has since given up his scooter to revolutionize cooking in school cafeterias in his country. Jamie Oliver has become a role model because of his passionate belief in encouraging young people to eat better and his desire to communicate to them the pleasure of COOKING.

"When talking to adults who are passionate about food, you'll very often find that they'll reminisce about their mums in the kitchen"... The kitchen needs to be fun not only for adults, but for kids as well. I love cooking with children, and I believe that they love it too, and that getting them interested in cooking is definitely the only way of improving what they eat<sup>6</sup>...

### Specific skills and generic skills that start in the kitchen...

Cooking is not an isolated activity but a complex process that enables children to learn because it encourages healthy curiosity. Few children hate cooking! Cooking is therefore more than just following a recipe: it is a discussion about

everyone's tastes; it means talking about tasting and the vocabulary that relates to it; it means using words to explain what is meant by *bitter*, *sweet*, *salty* or *acidic*... It means going back in time to discover a particular food and its origins... it means tasting and talking, and also sometimes failing to do the recipe properly and learning that famous recipes came about as a result of cooking mistakes, such as the famous tart created by accident by the famous Tatin sisters.

In short, whether one has access to a kitchen worthy of the great culinary institutions or a makeshift kitchen in the form of a table in the middle of a classroom, cooking gives children the opportunity to do something with their sensory and motor skills, and to affirm their personality by discussing what they like, and what they have cooked and eaten before. What better laboratory can there be than the kitchen for learning how to interact smoothly, communicate (Pass me the butter, please), enhance one's understanding of the world, use information, solve problems, exercise critical judgment, use creativity, adopt effective work methods, cooperate with others and complete a project??

<sup>7</sup> Quebec Education Program, *Preschool Education, Elementary Education*, version approved in July 2003.

<sup>6</sup> *Happy Days with the Naked Chef*, Hyperion, 2002.

### Love pies... Why not?

Allowing children to cook should be more than an occasional occupational activity. It is important to understand that getting children to cook enables them to develop the art of living through cooking. It also enables them to learn their way around the kitchen... and gets them to think about their own eating habits.

I recall encountering a teacher at one of the professional workshops I was facilitating. She told us about her first culinary experience at the age of five: an apple pie she had made with a great deal of love for her father. Her father called it a love pie, even though it was a culinary disaster... She went on to tell us that she had refined her technique since then, but that she and her family continue to this very day to call her apple pies, *love pies*...

So I would like you all to remember your own love pies and to help the children around you learn to bake their own... Nothing but happiness and pleasure can come from carrying on the tradition of the *art of living through cooking!*

### About the author

An experienced teacher, Nadia Bazinet is an educational consultant in French as a second language for the English Montreal School Board. She has written books for young people and was awarded the literary prize known as the Gourmand Cookbook Award 2007 for Best Cookbook for Children and the Family in Canada for her book: *Dinde recherche farce désespérément* of Clafoutine et ses amis, a collection for four to eight-year-olds published by Les Éditions La Presse. She has also written *Relaxation pour les tout-petits*, published by Nadimadi. For more information: [nadia@nadimadi.ca](mailto:nadia@nadimadi.ca) or <http://librairie.cyberpresse.ca/categories/littérature-jeunesse-35.html>.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation presents the

President's Forum  
**FORCES FOR 2010**  
**CHANGE**  
Education Finance

July 12-13, 2010  
Sutton Place Hotel, Edmonton, Alberta

Featuring national and international keynote speakers:  
Council of Ministers of Education, Canada  
Assembly of First Nations  
Fraser Institute  
Education International  
Canadian Council on Learning  
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives  
National Education Association (USA)  
and more.

\$200 registration fee • Register online at  
**www.ctf-fce.ca**

 Canadian Teachers' Federation  
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants