

Feed your children well  
by Lloyd Robertson

The boy had been held back in grade one. His teachers were convinced that he was severely mentally handicapped. At age 7 he could not speak well enough to be understood. I was there to confirm that he qualified for "high cost" educational funding.

He was obese with a dull look in his eyes that betrayed no thinking behind them. I welcomed him with my best artificial cheeriness. He said something. I told him not to worry, that most children liked my tests. He looked directly at me and said something else that I didn't understand. I made another guess and told him the tests were to help the teachers make school a better place for him. He relaxed, a brightness appeared in his eyes, and he began babbling incoherently at me. I noted that his teeth were badly deformed, his tongue appeared swollen and his breath stank. He scored well within the average range on the non-verbal test of intelligence that I administered.

On a hunch, I asked the teacher what the boy had for lunch. She said "chocolate cake and coke". I asked her what he usually had and was told that it was always the same. I asked to see the boy's parents on my next trip.

Only the mother appeared. I was told that the only thing the boy would eat at home was chocolate cake. I asked if they had taken the boy to see a dentist and was told that they could not afford the trip. With the help of Social Services the boy received the dental work he needed and the home received a parent aid. With the help of a speech and language pathologist the boy was speaking coherently and achieving at close to grade level by grade three.

There was an unfortunate study in the 1960s that suggested that children would, if given choices, naturally eat a balanced diet. This gave many parents permission to avoid meal time hassles by allowing children to eat, or not eat, whatever they wanted.

The researcher's method was to put infants and toddlers on the floor, surrounded by a wide variety of dishes, and to record what foods they put in their mouths. No other psychologist was able to replicate the study and it appears as tho the initial researcher simply obtained a random result: the same baby would crawl in different directions at different sittings without any intent to vary his diet.

As every parent knows, children before the age of two will put just about anything in their mouths. Then they learn, mostly from us, to restrict what they eat. They learn to like certain foods and not like others. Sometimes we have no idea why a child chooses to like, or not like, a particular food. For example, I do not understand the logic of my daughter who used to hate the taste of mushrooms but love the taste of mushroom soup. But once a child has chosen to dislike something then, for them, it tastes bad. Tastes change, later in life, only when we are motivated to make them change.

Okay, there are some universals. Certain poisonous plants are very bitter and we have evolved the automatic reaction of spitting out such plants should we accidentally bite into one. Also,

harmful bacteria in meat emit a taste we find putrid. From the point of view of the bacteria, they want all the meat for themselves. From our point of view, we don't want to eat any of them.

In fact, we don't want to even take the first bite. Young children use us as kings of old used to use royal food tasters. If we eat it, and don't die, it's probably safe for them. If, however, we show the slightest hesitation that they may not like something; then chances are they won't like it. Whole taste groups (sweet, sour, bitter, spicy) may get avoided. Some foods will taste bad because it is a way of asserting the child's independence, as when they go thru the stage that "No" becomes a powerful word. Other foods may be associated with something repulsive, fried mushrooms may look like dark little bugs.

By age five children typically operate as tho there is a proscribed list. If a food is on the list, it is good. If a food is not on the list, it is bad. It is our challenge, as parents, to ensure that our childrens' food lists are as long as possible. We need to enthusiastically encourage them to try many healthy foods and we have to insist that they eat balanced diets.