

Whose role is it to overcome childhood obesity, and what will help?

Barbie Clarke interviews Stephanie Valentine, Education Director, British Nutrition Foundation

The debate over whether a ban on advertising food to children would be the answer to escalating levels of childhood obesity is a burning issue. Barbie Clarke interviews Stephanie Valentine, Education Director of the British Nutrition Foundation, to get an educator and nutritionist's perspective on childhood obesity.

'I have never met a parent who actively wanted to mistreat their child by feeding them the wrong things, so my view is that parents are generally well motivated, and often really quite anxious about how to do it right'.

Stephanie Valentine

A MIDST THE FURORE that has raged over the last few months about childhood obesity and diet, it is refreshing to find a voice of wisdom and common sense. Hearing Stephanie Valentine speak at the Food Advertising Standards Conference 'Changing Attitudes to Children's Food' last November, her note was pragmatic and realistic, acknowledging that children are always going to want sweets, chocolate and other 'treats'. Meeting her for this interview, her stance continues to be philosophical. 'What I don't like is when people get all sanctimonious and very defensive. A diet that is made up of celery isn't actually a healthy diet, however virtuous it may be in some people's eyes. You have to have a sense of proportion and a sense of balance.'

The situation for parents though is complex. Stephanie believes that there has never been such a selection of food products, especially those targeted to children. She cites as just one example the more adult option of sandwich shops: 'How ridiculous is this – we go out and buy sandwiches. Ten years ago that would have seemed impossible. There has been such an explosion of the foods on sale, there is a tendency to eat more food out and more food eaten

at home is ready-prepared. These changes have advantages and disadvantages; convenience foods are readily available but more expensive; they are often quite calorific, but taste good and fill you up. People who attack hamburger bars sometimes come from a supposed high moral ground, that "one should feed our children organic cucumbers" or whatever, whereas in fact a lot of families can't afford, or get access to, organic food, but they can get access to a hamburger that their children will eat, they can afford, and will fill them up.'

Food and drink manufacturers

I wonder how much Stephanie feels the onus is on food manufacturers to improve the nutritional benefit of the food they market to children. 'I think some food manufacturers, possibly led by the retailers, are very conscious of being responsible and the corporate social responsibility and the community responsibility aspect of their work is key. So you are getting product lines, particularly children's products, that have really focused on nutrition. A lot of the supermarkets have product ranges designed for children, on the one hand you can say "Isn't that typical they are marketing to children" and on the other hand, "What's different about these products?" Is it that they are just covered in cartoon characters? Actually it's not. Supermarkets have consciously set criteria that the products must meet, and they are lower in salt and fat. I think that should be encouraged and applauded,

quite honestly. It's difficult to put together a convenience food with high nutritional content.

Stephanie is not wholly without criticism of the food and drink industry though. 'I think vending machines in schools have come in for some justified criticism. Some of the big companies are looking at taking the branding off the outside of the machine and expanding the range of products inside, providing mineral water, juice-based drinks, so it's not just the heavy commercial sell. A lot of schools depend on the vending machine income to run the minibus or various other things. It's an important thing that children have access to food and drink – they're growing and they're hungry. A lot of them haven't had breakfast. I think there are a lot of positives that can come from vending machines in schools, the big companies should look to play to their strengths.'

In many ways then, Stephanie sees a significant opportunity for food and drink manufacturers and retailers, to become more involved in giving genuine information and advice on nutrition to parents. Companies should be aware such initiatives can backfire, for example the recent Cadbury's marketing initiative in the UK that involved purchasing books, computers or games equipment for schools, in exchange for thousands of product wrappers or vouchers.

Stephanie can see ways in which the BNF can work with retailers and manufacturers to promote themselves through schools. An example of this is the Scottish Healthyliving Food Challenge for schoolchildren. Launched last year as part of Sainsbury's Taste of Success scheme, and developed jointly with The Design & Technology Association (DATA) and the BNF, the scheme challenged pupils to develop a new and inspiring vegetable-based recipe. Last year the challenge

was to come up with a product that used regional Scottish vegetables. The girl who won, Mhari Robertson, developed veggie burgers that were assessed for commercial viability, and now has her product on sale in Sainsbury's with her picture on the front of the packaging. The runner-up had a recipe card made of his idea, 'Ben's Stir Fry'. This year's challenge is to develop a delicious and inspiring recipe for a savoury main meal, which is low in salt and contains seasonal Scottish vegetables. The top prize will be the winning pupil's creation being developed into a new recipe card for every Sainsbury's store throughout the UK. In addition the winning school will receive £250 in Sainsbury's vouchers, and there are two runner-up prizes of £100. Stephanie comments 'It's quite difficult to persuade food manufacturers that in the long term it's much better to give a balanced view on nutrition. I do think that people aren't stupid and children don't like being patronised.'

Children's food

From the British Nutrition Foundation's perspective, there are some aspects of the food industry that alarm her. 'I suppose the preponderance of what I would call nursery foods worries me – the development of products purporting to be specifically for children. It's hard to tell quite what these foods are; they seem to be always coated in breadcrumbs or batter and then say "oven-bake." In fact, you oven-bake because it has already been deep-fried. I don't like things that are misleading or not quite the whole truth. And take breakfast cereals, it always seems to be the sugar- and chocolate-coated varieties that appeal to children. What would you rather do – have your child eat nothing or give them something like this that they will eat.'

Blame can be laid at some schools also, although clearly they do their best on a limited budget. I mention to Stephanie that a few years back when I was working in a school as a counsellor, the headteacher told me that the school had tried salad and fruit for a term with, and the food just got thrown out at the end of each day. Stephanie recognises this problem, but believes that schools could take more responsibility. 'I think that it's a bit of a cop-out really because school cooks will often say "I know what my children like." For instance they may provide jacket potatoes, but their will be chips as well – in a school of 300 children, perhaps only 12 jacket potatoes will have been cooked and majority of the children eat chips. The school is sort of fulfilling the requirement to provide jacket potatoes, the kitchen don't want to be left with leftovers, and the budget and time for producing lunches is tight. I can understand why it is that schools do what they do.'

Teaching children to eat healthily

Is it possible to educate children about nutrition, thereby changing attitudes towards a healthy diet, I ask. After all, the greater the demand for 'healthy' food, including organic food, the cheaper it is likely to become. Stephanie is unequivocal about this: 'I think education is a help but I don't think it will suddenly mean that this child will magically want to eat turnip soup. Children will be children and they will eat all sorts of things and they'll have their favourites. It is the activity part of the equation that needs addressing because if you look at children's energy intakes they would be falling, yet we're getting fatter – we're so idle and so static. It's the children being taken to school in the car; not letting children out in the streets because

parents don't feel it is safe; not having the time to do organised activities with them.'

Informing this view is Stephanie's background at the sharp end of teaching. She worked as a home economics teacher for seven years in south-east London in a very tough secondary modern school, followed by what she describes as 'a smart girls' grammar school', and then a mixed comprehensive. Stephanie taught for 17 years in total, and then went into the advisory service becoming a Local Education Authority advisor in Redbridge in north-east London. Her remit included 14 secondary schools, 60 primary schools and a handful of special schools for which she and her team were responsible.

Stephanie came to the British Nutrition Foundation over ten years ago. An independent scientific charity, it receives funds from its member companies, mostly food manufacturers and retailers, as well as funding from the Government, and other charitable sources. The BNF has run since 1967, with two main areas of work – school education and science – with a big overlap. The team of just 16 includes nutrition scientists who, among other tasks, answer calls from journalists who may be asking about the latest bikini diet or in need of feedback on a particular story. The team is also involved in writing briefing papers and booklets on particular topics, for example, on childhood obesity. Stephanie explains: 'It is really into communicating messages about nutritional health and well-being to everybody who's interested – I might be working with infant children in a school, trying to encourage them to have a positive attitude to food or I might be speaking at an international conference – it varies completely. Two days are never the same.'

Nevertheless, starting with schools seems a good place to encourage children, and through them their parents, to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

The teaching of nutrition in schools is focused on the fact that all aspects of food and nutrition are based on science, and aims to help individuals recognise that food is a basic requirement in life and should be enjoyed. It also aims to develop an understanding of underlying scientific principles on which current issues in nutrition are based. The syllabus involves what most people would associate with 'domestic science', including food-growing methods, food processing, and domestic and commercial situations, the latter being somewhat contentious. Stephanie's view on how this message is put across in schools is clear: 'Encouraging the awareness of the social, economic and cultural aspects of food choice ... and then most importantly to enable individuals to demonstrate and apply appropriate knowledge of concepts and principles when planning and preparing meals and making food choices. It's not just something theoretical; it's something you apply very much.'

The role of the National Curriculum

In England and Wales, healthy eating is part of the primary school curriculum (5–11 year-olds), and nutrition is part of the science curriculum in the early stages of secondary school (11–16 year-olds). In primary schools, children are taught about healthy eating and making food choices. Stephanie explains, 'One of the suggested activities by the English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is encouraging children to eat more fruit and vegetables. I was in school last week observing design and technology for Year 1 (5–6 year-olds) and they were making fruit salad. The children look at fruit and vegetables, wondering what they would look like if they cut them in half, what they taste like and choosing their own mixture of fruit to make a fruit salad. So it is at that

level rather than talking to them about the vitamins and minerals in the fruit. It is very much about encouraging the children to have positive, enquiring attitudes to types of food that are both familiar and different, and they are almost learning this as part of personal and social health education.'

A different approach perhaps from when many of us were at school, but Stephanie does not regret the passing of traditional domestic science teaching. 'I don't subscribe to the rose-tinted spectacles view that in the good old days when you had all afternoon doing domestic science, the world was a better place. I didn't experience that at school; I didn't have domestic science as an option and so my perception is that it always used to be an activity that was offered to a limited number of children, almost exclusively girls and often girls who couldn't cope with other subjects that were more intellectually demanding. I think it had very low status.'

It could be that one of the problems in helping children to understand healthy eating is that home economics is not a part of the National Curriculum. Stephanie explains 'There is nothing that says schools can't teach it, but it isn't a statutory requirement for them to do so. Home economics was really where a lot of good teaching about basic nutrition went on. There's the theoretical bit in science where you talk about the structure of food, but it was where it was applied and practical that was important. I don't think design and technology quite captures implicitly the importance of nutrition. That's something we're really working to address. The nutritional value of food is an important aspect and a lot of companies are actually designing foods to meet nutritional criteria – whether it be reduced salt, reduced fat or increased fibre. I think that is a really positive thing and that in schools it is sometimes overlooked. Good design

and technology teachers have bent over backwards to teach areas they are not so good at, such as nutrition. We're feeling a backlash now and people are coming back saying, "But that was really important and that's what I really believe in" – I think people shouldn't be afraid to teach nutrition more rigorously.'

The parents' role

A lot of the debate about obesity levels among children – from the articles we read in the media, and indeed from food manufacturers themselves – is almost defensive about who can be blamed. Some manufacturers and advertisers take the stance, 'Well, of course we're being blamed, but actually these children don't eat on their own; they have a parent and the parent buys stuff for them. Isn't it about educating the parent?' I ask Stephanie whether a response to this criticism, to teach parents how to feed their children, is not somewhat elitist. Her answer is characteristically pragmatic: 'I think it is tricky one. I have never met a parent who actively wanted to mistreat their child by feeding them the wrong things, so my view is that parents are generally well motivated, and often really quite anxious about how to do it right.'

As an example, Stephanie tells me about the British Nutrition Foundation's work on 'Lunchbox Project'. 'We went to a school in leafy Buckinghamshire; we were trying to invite parents into the schools to talk about any difficulties they have with their packed lunches. And in this rural Buckinghamshire idyll there was standing room only – there were hoards of them in there! These children had packed lunches with all sorts of foods – nice sandwiches, fruit, vegetables, a policy that you could have crisps on Tuesdays and Fridays and they didn't allow carbonated drinks; instead they had juices,

squashes and water-based drinks, milk drinks – immaculate lunch-boxes. When I asked one little boy what he had in his lunch-box – he said "Two packets of pepper." When I asked why he had so much pepper, he said "One is red and one is yellow." In this particular setting the parents were anxious because they thought we were going to tell them how to make healthy lunches, they wanted the answers. I thought "you are educated, affluent and doing a great job – why are you so worried?" They were really keyed up that they wanted to do well.'

And yet Stephanie has been to other schools where she has seen children with just bread and margarine in their lunch-boxes. 'Why is this?', she questions. 'Is it that parents are just ignorant, or is it that they don't have anything in the fridge on a Thursday? Is it that the children are picky? I think handling information for parents is a very sensitive issue. I think most parents are interested, but there is a lot of guilt and anxiety involved and cost is a factor for many people – you don't want to start saying you should put in quails eggs and kiwi fruit in lunch-boxes because it's not helpful.'

Positive messages to schools, parents and children

The work BNF is doing with schools on the Lunchbox Project is opening up many ideas and avenues to encourage healthy eating among children. 'It's fascinating because you can start off by giving parents lots of brilliant new ideas for foods to put in lunchboxes, because when it comes down to it, it's quite tough to come up with inspiration. The standard lunch-box from my experience is a sandwich which is usually made from white sliced bread, a chocolate biscuit, a packet of crisps, a drink and possibly a piece of fruit.' A worrying trend picked up from

the lunch-box survey is an absence of dairy foods. Stephanie tells me 'A lot of them didn't have yoghurt, cheese, anything of that variety. And really quite a worrying lack of a main source of protein.' I suggested this was down to practical reasons, such as temperature control – what happens if you put yoghurt in a lunch-box? Are parents terrified their child is going to get food poisoning? Stephanie feels it is more that, 'If you give a child an egg sandwich and it gets warm, it smells and the child will not eat it.'

Many schools, though, are becoming increasingly innovative in Stephanie's experience, with initiatives such as Funky Food Friday. Or there is Silly Sandwich Day, with children, parents and teachers designing their own sandwiches with a pitta pocket, tortilla or bagel, instead of using sliced bread. But the reality of many parents' lives is not lost on Stephanie: 'A lot of it is the reality of getting up in the morning, and you've got three kids – one doesn't eat this, one doesn't eat that, and if you don't give them what they want to eat they throw it at the seagulls. Even though you put the food in the lunch-box, there is no guarantee the child will eat it. At school there are all types of sophisticated swaps going on; some schools have rules to say you can't swap food; others insist that the children take home what they haven't eaten so the parents know.'

The BNF was awarded the Lunchbox Project contract to develop an effective, sustainable approach to improving the nutritional content of packed lunches for schoolchildren as part of the Department of Health Food in Schools programme. The first phase is due to be completed by the end of December 2004, and will establish the opportunities, needs and barriers from parents, pupils, teachers and other interested parties, for example, local dieticians. The second phase, depending on the recommendations from

the first phase, will develop and evaluate the use of any resources or training to improve the nutritional content of packed lunches. The project has strong links to the Five A Day Programme, which includes the National School Fruit Scheme.

Ultimately, the Lunchbox Project will appear as a report for the Department of Health, with recommendations from the BNF, followed by a conference. The BNF hopes to come up with 'a toolkit', ideas and suggestions on how to organise a practical workshop for teachers, parents and children to work together. Stephanie is enthusiastic about the scope for this. 'The teachers are very keen to get the children enthused, and then the children go home and say "I'll have a tuna pitta pocket tomorrow – I learnt how to make one at school." We want to have some kind of information source so people can cut and paste bits from newsletters to give ideas and prompts.'

Stephanie Valentine believes that giving information to parents is difficult; everyone feels they know how to be a parent, but they clearly seek more guidance on nutrition. To provide helpful information, the BNF is considering sending schools a CD-ROM that can be printed in sections and used to send out information in an informal, and unpatronising manner. Stephanie explains, 'Maybe when the headteacher sends a letter – they can say "Are you putting fruit in your child's lunch-box? Satsumas are very good at this time of year." It is helpful to have little snippets rather than heavy and preachy information. Some parents don't know as much as they would like. I suspect that things like *Woman's Own* would be very good media to get information across in a nice, non-threatening way.'

Clearly the British Nutrition Foundation is going to be instrumental in being the voice of

reason in the debate about children's diet, and in encouraging children, parents, and schools to adopt healthier children's eating patterns. And if

Stephanie has anything to do with it, this will be put across in a fun, realistic, and highly practical way.

Stephanie Valentine

Stephanie Valentine is Education Director of the British Nutrition Foundation. After teaching in south London for 17 years, Stephanie became the first advisory teacher for home economics, and then adviser for design and technology, in the London Borough of Redbridge. She has been working at the British Nutrition Foundation for more than ten years, where she runs the extensive education programme. This includes producing multi-media resources, giving presentations, writing articles and providing courses and conferences throughout the UK. Her work involves collaboration with government departments, higher education and industry. She is also working increasingly across Europe and with the British Council, helping to develop nutrition education materials in Brazil.

