

Letter to the Editor (unpublished) – LA Times

RE: ‘Super Size Me’ Filmmaker Offers Food For Thought’ (December 1, 2004, pg.B2)

Morgan Spurlock gains credibility as a health spokesperson because he gained 25 pounds and 7% body fat while compromising his lipid profile and liver status on a 30 day McDonald’s binge. I wonder how balanced his message is? Does he underscore that this happened because he was eating 200% of his recommended food intake while engaging in no activity compared to his usual vegetarian diet and very active lifestyle? Or does he let the audiences assume that any amount of fast food leads to a similar outcome?

As a dietitian I am thrilled that kids get the message that eating a high sugar and refined starch diet coupled with or without fat is a problem. But fast food isn’t the real culprit. It is only an easy and mindless target. Blaming our obesity issues on a third party allows us the illusion that if we could just get rid of fast food, the problem would be solved. This assumption would be laughable if the consequences weren’t so tragic.

The real culprit is an entire culture of indulgence. Our children are literally bearing the weight of it. We need to clean up our act in the entire village. I bump up against this culture with every client I meet. On a more personal level, I struggle to help my pre-diabetic child navigate the terrain. Here’s what it is like:

1. Fast food is fairly easy to manage, especially now with a wider range of options at most outlets. After all, I am supervising the ordering and hold the pocketbook. Isn’t this the responsibility of all parents and caregivers?
2. Sit down restaurants are harder. At our table the basket of bread or tortilla chips gets spirited away after “some”. Just guess how many times a well meaning server replaces the empty or “missing” basket without asking if we want more. Same for the soda. (even if it is “diet”)
3. Restaurants serve “kids meals” that are a poor substitute for a balanced meal. For ten days on vacation last August at *very nice* hotels and restaurants there was not one kid’s menu offering a fruit or vegetable. I would often negotiate for a side fruit salad or sliced carrots or cucumbers. At one resort I was charged an additional five dollars for the cucumber when the entire kid’s meal was priced at \$4.99.
4. At the same resort our room’s mini “bar” was stocked with chips, candy and soda. A quick call to housekeeping had all the treats removed and we frequented the local market for baby carrots, fruit, nuts, yogurt and cheese for snacks. We still enjoyed desserts and treats, but at our initiation. Not because it was in our face every day.

5. Play dates are a minefield. At most houses my son visits snacks typically consist of boxed juice or fruit drinks (same sugar), cookies, chips, granola or protein bars with most resembling candy bars more than you want to know. One mom and child met us at the park for a one hour play date with a bag of four fruit drinks, two cereal bars, two fruit roll ups, and a small bag of cookies. We were there for an hour. I brought a cut up apple.
6. Kid's birthday parties have morphed into feeding frenzies. Huge bowls of chips and candy and buckets of sodas or politically correct juice boxes (same sugar) are strategically placed all over. Then the kids get cake and ice cream and goody bags stuffed with more candy. While kids who aren't into sugar have a few bites and go off and play, I am left to keep my son from finishing off everyone else's left-overs. Not every kid "gets away with it."
7. Family parties and celebrations are no different. And family members love to be on the receiving end of my son's affection as they gift him with treats. I am exhausted mediating and allowing "some" without coming off as the food police.
8. School environments are not much help—and most of it isn't the formal food service. True, I make my son's lunch and snack every day. The regular food service doesn't serve the balance of protein, fat and carbohydrate that works for him and there is not nearly enough produce.

It is really all the "other" food that is a challenge even in elementary school. Fundraising that is dependent on buying candy, cookie dough, pizza and soda or ice cream is not balanced. Teachers and other school personnel sometimes rely on candy or other treats for rewards and that sends the wrong message. Classroom birthday and holiday parties rely on cupcakes and punch for entertainment and happen more than you would imagine.

9. Towards the end of a 12 week workshop that my son attended the staff was outlining plans for the "graduation" party. They were planning for pizza and parents were encouraged to "bring lots of junk food, only junk food". I spoke up and said that those plans didn't meet my son's needs and was met with intense resistance to any change. The staff's response was, "We want this to be really fun".
10. I'm planning my son's 9th birthday party as I write. At the amusement park I negotiated for a take home toy instead of the "kid's meals" offered. When I discussed that I wanted to serve the kids from the adult catering menu (sandwiches, a fruit tray and a vegetable platter) instead of the usual high starch, high sugar and high fat kid's fare, I was met with concern. Despite knowing that we would serve cake and ice cream, the coordinator exclaimed, "Why would you want to deprive the other kids?"

It is a culture of indulgence that creates a sense of deprivation if we are not getting or offering a “treat” at every possible opportunity. Physiologically most of us are not programmed to handle such abundance. We are really much better suited to survive scarcity. No wonder Americans and peoples of all nations are struggling with increasing girth. Never in mankind’s history has there been such an extended period of abundance and as a society we haven’t figured out how to handle it.

Telling people what to eat and what not to eat only offers an illusion of control. The reality is that people need to learn how to eat given today’s food environment. Despite Morgan Spurlock’s wistful memories of his mom cooking every meal at home, I don’t see us going back.

Learning how to eat means honoring body cues so that we eat when we are hungry and stop at “enough”. Full is too much for most of us. Stuffing ourselves leads to exactly the kind of weight gain and health problems experienced by Mr. Spurlock.

Right alongside learning how to eat we need to figure out how to live. Our bodies thrive with an active lifestyle as adults and children, especially without the chronic stress we currently endure. That could mean shifting our expectations so that work—even homework-- and material possessions take a back seat so we have enough time to eat well and play enough.

The time to model and practice a healthy lifestyle, balanced food choices and regular physical movement with our kids is now. Thin kids only seem to get away with it. Most of my overweight clients were thin as kids.

Disclosure:

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