

Adolescent food choices

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Friends, schoolwork, relationships, family and work combine to make the lives of teenagers complex and challenging. The value of eating well is often not understood or even considered important in this balancing act, yet it plays a vital role in their current and future health and wellbeing.

While the rate of obesity in Australia continues to climb steadily, research shows that many young people are also struggling with eating disorders. Of particular concern are these high-risk nutritional behaviours: the dieting culture so endemic amongst young girls, skipping meals, excessive alcohol consumption and poor food choices.

Food choice influences

So what does influence the way our teenagers feed themselves today? What are the social, psychological, emotional and sensory factors that help determine food their choices?

For adolescents, by far one of the most influential aspects of eating is the sensory – taste. As the struggle for independence becomes stronger and teens start making more choices for themselves, they start to voice their likes and dislikes more and more.

In a confusing world, food choice is something they can control easily. Eating food that tastes good makes them feel good. Many kids think that if it tastes good and fills them up that's all that matters. The health aspect is often simply not in the equation. The challenge here, of course, is that fast and convenience foods are made to appeal to young and impressionable taste buds – and are highly addictive.

The value of family mealtimes

Family also plays a major role in adolescent food choices. Numerous studies suggest that teenagers who share most meals with the family at the table eat better and choose food more wisely.

Children of time poor parents tend to eat more processed, convenience foods, and usually away from the family table, consequently parental influence on food intake and quality is reduced.

Parents are strong role models for their children. The saying goes 'A breakfast eating parent raises a breakfast eating child'. If parents are seen to eat breakfast, their children will be more likely to do so too. If parents eat a range of fruit and vegetables, then their offspring will too.

How, when and what parents eat has a strong influence on how, when and what their children eat. Our cultural heritage comes to the fore here, as well. The food environment teenagers are exposed to as young children will certainly influence their food choices as they mature



Pizza may taste good but it's not sufficient for growing teens

and it is always interesting to study cultural differences in food tastes. In times of stress and anxiety teenagers will often turn for comfort to the food and food rituals of their childhood.

Demographics

Demographics and environment play an enormous role in how teens learn to make food choices. A drive through the outer suburbs of any Australian city will uncover a proliferation of fast food chains; row after row of them. Where are the quality cafes and restaurants? In the affluent suburbs and the inner city. Kids in the outer suburbs have often never been exposed to anything but fast food restaurants. Eating out means dining on a hamburger and fries, fried chicken or pizza.

Peer pressure

Time and peer pressure play key roles in influencing teenagers' eating habits. Time is important to them and unstructured meal times and grazing are part of the teen way of life.

Skipping meals and choosing to snack is part of a growing culture and commonplace among adolescents. Inadequate intake and poor nutrition come hand in hand with this way of eating.

Peer influence also starts to exceed parental influence and opportunities to eat away from home increase.

The fact that teenagers often do not have much money to spend or do not like to spend it on food, leads them to fast food restaurants. As these are also a natural meeting place for teenagers, the social determinants come into play.

Being 'cool' is extremely critical to teenagers. If soft drink and a burger is the 'cool' food of choice for an adolescent boy, then a salad and a bottle of water don't get a look in. If everyone is eating popcorn and cola at the movies, then it is a tough call to do anything else.

Young people within a group need to take into account what, when and how their peers eat and then make decisions about whether or not to fit into this 'norm'. This can be particularly difficult for teens THAT struggle to make or maintain friendships.

The marketing blitz

Kids today are bombarded with marketing. Elaborate and sophisticated advertisements on the radio, television, the internet, at the movies, on billboards and in magazines assail them.

Most of the food advertisements are, of course, for fast foods, breakfast cereals, snacks and confectionary that are high in sugar, salt and cheap fats and are nutritionally inadequate. Yet they are powerful and persuasive.

Cross promotions and the use of celebrities and licensed characters make the marketing even more insidious and the social appeal of some advertisements is potent and highly influential.

Idealised media images of the female (and male) body also influences food choices; young girls are particularly at risk of developing eating disorders.

It is vital for the present and future health of our teenagers that they receive strong and positive food messages and are encouraged at every turn to make nutritious food choices.

As educators we can play a major role in this by ensuring that the food messages kids receive at school are strong, consistent and practical and help maximise their potential.



Jacqui Deighan runs food education programs in schools throughout Victoria and offers food education resources nationally. Visit www.naturalkitchenstrategies.com.au