

Psychology Of Obesity

By Dr Jo Jones, Paediatrician, in Blazer, September 2012

La Rouchefoucauld stated, "To eat is a necessity, but to eat intelligently is an art".

I touched upon the *Psychology* of why we eat and why we feed our children in my last editorial. To my mind, this is an area that is much neglected, and explains in part the rise in obesity in all age ranges and why 90% of people return to their original weight within a year after dieting. I don't know of similar statistics for children, but childhood obesity is worryingly on the rise along with the high blood pressure and diabetes that often follow it.

The most important question is one to ask ourselves as parents. Why do we eat? What are the triggers apart from true hunger? Understanding exactly what makes us reach for food, (often high in sugar, fat and salt - all substances that raise body endorphins, make us feel good and make us want more), helps us understand how and why we really feed our children, and why traits in parents are often "inherited" by children. I put "inherited" in inverted commas because although we certainly inherit a body type, we very rarely inherit obesity. What our children *can* inherit is an 'obesogenic environment' in which home is a place where it is easy to over-eat and become overweight.

What is an obesogenic environment? It's a home where cupboards are full of snacks to reach for when we are out of sorts ... "I need comfort...I'm bored...I want to reward myself...I deserve it..." In other words, the desire to eat is not about maintaining our bodies but is mixed up with other emotions – being an "emotional eater". Unhealthy food is bought 'just in case' rather than bought in for a specific occasion. It's a home where there is too much sedentary behaviour – sitting around instead of being busy, and where exercise is rare or done in short bursts with inactivity in between. And it's a home where food is bought ready-made rather than home cooked, because it is 'easy' and quicker to eat, ...and quicker to satisfy the desire to eat quickly and fill that emotional void, whatever the cause of the void may be.

Does that ring a bell – food eaten for comfort, as a reward, when we are bored? Because they are subconsciously part of our make-up, those traits tend to then risk becoming part of our daily parenting where a child is given food if demanding too much attention; a snack if they say they are hungry despite lunch being a mere 30 minutes away; a treat if they have been good; a treat if they are upset or have a scraped knee. Can you see how that can then create a habit for life? That child then tends to parent in a similar way thereby creating an "inherited" body shape and "inherited" health problems.

Standard health advice doesn't always help. I absolutely don't buy the concept of toddlers 'needing' to graze and snack. A baby generally gets fed every 4 hours, once established in a routine. Their metabolism doesn't radically change when they get up on their feet to toddle, so why should they suddenly need snacks? I never received snacks as a child, hence still rarely eat between meals. I have never given my children snacks hence they don't eat between meals either. They come out of school and quite happily wait a couple of hours for supper. They eat pretty much all their food three times a day, with mandatory fruit and no pudding unless 'brain food' is eaten full stop. That isn't anything supersonic on my part except habit, but rather a good one "inherited" from my parents.

Toddlers end up being allowed to graze because they're at an age where they can get faddy about food. Feeding our children is a primeval urge for parents, mothers especially, and it feels like a body blow when our child refuses to eat his lunch. Instead of persevering briefly and then putting the meal away firmly saying, "Never mind, that's it till supper..." and then sticking to it, there's the tendency to give the child something else instead, often 'snacky' and often sweet like a yogurt. The child thinks "Great! That worked....better try that next time!" Those snacks briefly fill the child up but because they're small in volume and often short acting in terms of energy release, the child soon wants more. Avoiding the task of making children sit properly at the table also avoids proper meal times, hence avoids proper healthy filling meals. I also don't believe that it's healthy to constantly use our digestive tracts; our stomachs need a rest too! Various diets push the concept of small frequent meals. This might be helpful with some adults but it also creates a habit – the need for a constantly busy mouth often full of food of little nutritional value. Children who feed constantly can become orally fixated – they habitually need to use their mouths, often sucking and chewing things too.

We are not winning in the battle to keep our children's weight down and keep them from developing health problems such as cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes that will inevitably shorten their lives. The reality is that stark.