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## Home is where the food role models are

### Some parents underestimate kids' willingness to eat healthfully

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**BY PHIL LEMPERT**

To the '60s refrain "You are what you eat," let us now add, "What our kids eat is even more important."

Some 40 years after digesting the first premise, we are in the midst of a new food revolution that is being led by the President and the First Lady.

If, as Michelle Obama says, it is possible to turn the obesity problem around in one generation, it will not happen by government mandate alone. Revamps of school cafeteria menus and less availability of sugary soft drinks and candy in vending machines are part of the solution, but the most important factor will be re-educating the palate of future generations.

The time has come for a stronger "food sense" — not only where our foods come from, but an appreciation of what real foods taste like.

Let's hope that the First Lady's "Let's Move" initiative marks the point in time when children and their parents vow to do better, vow to wean off much of the salts, fats and sugars that are so laden in kids' foods today, vow to eat more naturally, and call on the makers of kids' foods to be more responsible in what they proffer on supermarket shelves and in vending machines.

There's much at stake. The March issue of the Pediatrics journal published two studies pointing to greater risk for obesity among minority children, according to an account by the Associated Press.

One study by the University of North Carolina suggests that "three-year-olds with inflammation might already have artery changes that could make them prone to later heart problems, although that needs to be examined in future research."

A separate study done at Harvard Medical School identified numerous risk factors for obesity (many diet- and sleep-related), and concluded "minorities were at higher risk than whites for nearly every one." The study further cited government data, noting that 20 percent of black and Hispanic children ages 2 to 19 are obese, versus 15 percent of whites.

So how do we get our kids to broaden their food horizons?

I would suggest that all too often parents are feeding their kids what they think their kids want. In today's hassled and hurried lives, we look to compensate for the time and things we cannot give our kids with food — and sometimes it's the wrong food.

According to a recent survey from Mintel Menu Insights, when ordering at a restaurant, three out of four children are open to ordering foods with vegetables. Even more — 86 percent — would order items that contain fruit.

The big disconnect is that only three parents in 10 say their children eat healthfully in restaurants, even though Mintel found that kids are willing to eat better. The needle is moving — though with quite some distance to go.

French fries are still the most common side (on 66 percent of kids' menus), but fruits have risen to 43 percent and vegetables to 39 percent. Rice and salad are at 18 percent each, Mintel data shows.

The menu descriptor “fresh” appeared on 17 percent of kids' menu items in the second quarter of 2009, up from eight percent just four years earlier. A few positive examples: grilled chicken strips with a “fresh garden salad” at Bob Evans, “fresh apple fries” at Burger King and tropical citrus salad with chicken at the Elephant Bar Restaurant.

Our children are not only influenced by their parents when it comes to food, but a new study also finds an opportunity to change food habits through social networking.

This study, conducted by the University of Buffalo's Division of Behavioral Medicine and published in January's *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, looked at the interrelationship between food and social activity in children. This is the first lab-based study of its kind and results indicate that friends may influence just how much adolescents eat.

Fifty-four overweight and non-overweight children ages nine to 11 were randomly assigned to bring a friend or were paired with another child they did not know. The duos played computer games, accumulating points that could be exchanged for either food or time to spend with their friend.

Those kids who were matched with a friend exchanged points for time with their friend instead of food. The study concluded that a “youth's social network may be uniquely relevant and influential to eating behavior and choice of activities.”

Setting a good example for our next generations is more important and more needed than ever.

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