Feeding Our Kids, Kidding Ourselves

David L. Katz, MD, MPH, FACPM, FACP

Human offspring come into this world much like the young of all other mammals, and like all the others, within minutes of our arrival, we are hungry. Food figures prominently in our lives ever after, but never is it more important than in childhood, when it serves as the literal construction material of those growing bodies and brains.

The initial food choice for human babies should be self-evident, as it is for all other baby mammals: the milk of their mothers. The provision of that milk is among the defining characteristics of the mammalian class; it is part of what makes us what we are.

Of course, though, another thing that makes us *Homo sapiens* what we are is these large brains of ours, which are, of course, capable of great achievement, but, unfortunately, great mischief as well. One variety of that mischief is complicating the simple,¹ and over a span of decades, we have certainly done that with regard to breastfeeding, which has gone in and out of fashion. Fortunately, it is now very much back in fashion and, one hopes, here to stay. There are, of course, contraindications to breastfeeding, but these are idiosyncratic. Overwhelmingly, the literature attests vigorously and consistently to the wide array of benefits of breastfeeding.^{2,3} Mother's milk is the right first food for baby mammals almost all of the time, and baby humans are no exception.

If complications and mischief have encumbered the simple choice of breast milk, they have done far worse to the more challenging options that follow. What should human children eat? If we once again initiate our answer by considering our place in nature, that answer would seem to be: what their parents eat. Children should learn to eat the food that will sustain them throughout their lives.

My knowledge of the diverse interactions between mammal parents and mammal children is not that of an expert naturalist or zoologist; I have a day job, and those are not it. But, like many of you, I am sure, I have seen and enjoyed my share of nature programs. I have seen every episode of *Planet Earth* and *Life* multiple times. I grew up watching Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*. My amateur knowledge is informed by many other sources as well, including on-air, in print, and on-line. All but inevitably,

the predominant interaction between adults and young featured in such programming is about the acquisition of food. Some time may be spent with young play fighting and learning other skills they need to succeed. But, we are consistently told, and shown, that teaching kids about how and what to eat is a very big part of mammalian parenting.

And then there is us. With these great, big, mischief-prone *Homo sapien* brains of ours, we have invented children's menus. We have turned chicken into fingers and nuggets. We have contrived the contention that multi-colored marshmallows are "part of a complete breakfast."

Studies conducted by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, by my colleagues at the Rudd Center at Yale, and others, have shown consistently that food preferentially marketed to children is preferentially bad.⁴⁻¹⁰ With all the recent attention given to the health effects of breakfast¹¹ and those of sugar, it is noteworthy that breakfast cereal marketed to kids is not only often a concentrated source of added sugar, but may even, at times, identify sugar as the first ingredient. That means the cereal is more sugar...than cereal. True, said cereal is then reliably "fortified with 11 essential vitamins and minerals," but I do not think I am being unduly harsh in perceiving this as analogous to lipstick on a pig.

The result of marketing preferentially junky foods to children is that our children, predictably, eat a lot of junk. The National Cancer Institute has reported that the "junk" food group has grown to represent from one third to as much as one half of calories in our kids' diets.¹² That this situation is an appalling abdication of responsibility on the part of the body politic should be self-evident. Food, after all, is the one and only construction material for the growing bodies and developing brains of our children. Who among us would sanction building anything we care about and hope to see last—house, car, computer—from junk? How, then, do we tolerate building the bodies of our children and grandchildren from such dubious material?

We would allow no such transgression with other species. Imagine, for instance, surreptitiously slipping artificially colored, artificially flavored loops, masquerading as having something to do with real fruit, to a real toucan. The

zoo authorities would, I trust, escort you off zoo grounds—if not in handcuffs—before you could say “red dye number 40.”

Consider, then, the prevailing duplicity. We use cartoon animals to market, to real human children, alleged items of food that the actual animal in question would never actually eat. Where kids and food come together, we seem to sanction distortion wrapped into deception and stuffed into exploitation. In an age of epidemic childhood obesity and diabetes, as well as rising rates of behavioral disorders in children for which we have, as yet, no adequate explanation,¹³ this is a cultural travesty. It redounds to our collective shame.

There is, of course, a case to make for treating kid food differently. Kids—human and otherwise—need smaller portions than adults. They are apt to benefit from food that is easier to get at, chew, and swallow. Kids will need time to familiarize themselves with new foods and flavors as well as navigate past the so-called “omnivore’s paradox,” or neophobia, that activates a native reticence borne of survival imperatives.

And, because kids are different developmentally, it does make sense for marketing to be age specific. There is research to show that produce can be marketed effectively to children in just the ways we all might suspect, such as making them convenient¹⁴ and dressing them up¹⁵; carrots, for instance, can put on a cape and become the “carrot crusader!” or some such thing. The point, quite simply, is that Madison Avenue’s cleverness can, and should, be applied to getting kids to eat what kids, who are loved by adults concerned for their well-being, actually should be eating.

But, for the most part, we have gone another way entirely. We have created a separate universe of kid foods, which the practices of our fellow mammals might suggest is dubious from the outset. But, we have gone a step further and made that universe of foods home to our most deplorable dietary practices. The fruit drink with beautiful images of fruit on the package, but no such fruit in the ingredient list, is invariably prominent among items sporting the currently popular cartoon or movie character on the package as well. We used to have to worry about taking candy from babies; now we are marketing it to them.

The feeding of children is one of the animal kingdom’s abiding preoccupations. Along with the inevitable antics of rambunctious youth of diverse species come the important life lessons about how to behave and succeed, salient among them the identification, selection, and acquisition of suitable, sustaining food.

We humans have made a mockery of the practice. Whether or not our contemporaries judge accordingly, I am confident that history will hold us to account. My suggestion is we beat the holiday rush and hold ourselves accountable right now.

To that end, I am inviting my colleagues to join me in a push for a national day of boycott of kid food.¹⁶ Again, I am not opposed to kid-size portions or anything that rea-

sonably lands in the overlap of good food and good marketing. It is the good marketing of bad food I have in my cross-hairs! I propose the organization of a national day of boycott not because I think it will have any major economic impact or because I think it will change food industry practices overnight. I am simply looking for awareness, a reality check, perhaps the cultural equivalent of rebooting a computer. I would like us to rock back on our heels and ask: What WAS I thinking?

So, I am asking you: Who’s with me? Please let me know by email at childhood.obesity@liebertpub.com. If we accumulate critical mass, we can make this happen. I think we should.

Most mammals seem to take the basic care and feeding of their offspring very seriously. Most mammals seem to recognize childhood as the time to cultivate the dietary aptitudes and attitudes that will shape a lifetime of sustenance. Our own species, or at least its currently prevailing culture, seems inclined to treat the feeding of our children as something of a joke. We seem inclined to confront the prominence of junk food in the diets of our children with a nudge-nudge, wink-wink, as if it were at worst cute—at best, a legitimate food group in its own right.¹⁷

It is neither. What we feed our children initiates and propagates a lifetime of taste preferences. What we feed our children cultivates lifelong perceptions and expectations. What we feed our children influences energy balance that, in turn, shapes the trajectory of weight across the lifespan. What we feed our children propels them away from, or toward, the risk of debilitating chronic disease. What we feed our children exerts a profound influence on their medical destinies. What we feed our children—and only that—is the construction material for those fast-growing little bodies we profess to love.

What we feed our children matters, profoundly. If our culture is inclined to think otherwise, we are, most egregiously, kidding ourselves.

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Address correspondence to:

David L. Katz, MD, MPH, FACPM, FACP
 Director, Yale University Prevention Research Center
 Griffin Hospital, 2nd Floor
 130 Division Street
 Derby, CT 06418

E-mail: david.katz@yale.edu