

**Words to Watch**

*diabetes* (4): a chronic health condition in which the body is unable to break down sugar in the blood

*coma* (12): a state of prolonged unconsciousness

*staple* (13): a basic item or feature

**“EXTRA LARGE,” PLEASE**

Alice M. Davies

1 School lunches have always come in for criticism. When I was a kid, we complained about “mystery meat” and “leftover surprise casserole.” Half a canned pear in a shaky nest of Jell-O didn’t do much to excite our taste buds. I hid my share of limp green beans under my napkin, the better to escape the eagle eye of lunchroom monitors who encouraged us to eat our soggy, overcooked vegetables.

2 But the cafeteria lunches were there, and so we ate them. (Most of them. OK, I hid the gooey tapioca pudding, too.) I think we accepted the idea that being delicious was not the point. The meals were reasonably nutritious, and they fueled our young bodies for the mental and physical demands of the day. In my case, that demand included walking a quarter mile to and from school, enjoying three recesses a day, and taking part in gym class a couple of times a week. After-school hours, at least when the weather was good, were spent outdoors playing kickball or tag with neighbor kids.

3 I can imagine you wondering, “Who cares?” I don’t blame you. My memories of school days in northern Indiana thirty-some years ago aren’t all that fascinating

even to me. And yet I think you should care, because of one fact I haven’t mentioned yet. When I was a kid and looked around at other kids my age, I saw all kinds of differences. There were tall ones and short ones and black and white and brown ones, rude ones and polite ones, popular ones and geeky ones, athletic ones and uncoordinated ones. But you know what? There weren’t many heavy ones. The few there were stood out because they were unusual. I think that if you had asked me at the time, I would have told you that kids are just naturally skinny.

Flash forward to the present. Walk 4 down any city street in America. Sit in a mall and watch the people stream by. You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to notice something’s changed. Whether you call them big-boned, chubby, husky, or plus-sized, kids are heavy, lots of them. If your own eyes don’t convince you, here are the statistics: Since 1980, the number of American kids who are dangerously overweight has tripled. More than 16 percent of our children—that’s 1 in 6—qualify as “obese.” Hordes of them are developing diet-related diabetes°, a disease that used to be seen almost always in adults. When

California's students in grades 5 through 12 were given a basic fitness test, almost 8 out of 10 failed.

5 Part of the problem is that many kids don't have good opportunities to exercise. They live in neighborhoods without sidewalks or paths where they can walk, bike, or skate safely. Drug activity and violent crime may make playing outside dangerous. They can reach their schools only by car or bus. Many of those schools are so short of money they've scrapped their physical-fitness classes. Too few communities have athletic programs in place.

6 Electronic entertainment also plays a role in the current state of affairs. Kids used to go outside to play with other kids because it was more fun than sitting around the house. Today, kids who sit around the house have access to dozens of cable TV channels, the Internet, DVD players, and a dizzying assortment of video games.

7 Still another cause is the lack of parental supervision. When I was a kid, most of us had a mom or an older sibling at home telling us to get off our butts and go outside. (The alternative was often to stay inside and do chores. We chose to go out and play.) Now, most American families have two working parents. For most of the daylight hours, those parents just aren't around to encourage their kids to get some exercise. A related problem is that parents who can't be home much may feel guilty about it. One way of relieving that guilt is to buy Junior the game system of his dreams and a nice wide-screen TV to play it on.

8 These are all complicated problems whose solutions are equally complicated. But there is one cause of the fattening of America's kids that can be dealt with more easily. And that cause is the

enormous influence that fast-food restaurants and other sources of calorie-laden junk have gained over America's kids.

I'm no health nut. I like an occasional Quarter Pounder as well as the next mom. There is no quicker way to my kids' hearts that to bring home a newly-released DVD, a large pepperoni pie, and a bag of Chicken McNuggets. But in our home, an evening featuring extra mozzarella and bottles of 7-Up is a once-in-a-while treat—sort of a guilty pleasure.

To many of today's kids, fast food is not a treat—it's their daily diet. Their normal dinnertime equals McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Domino's, Burger King, Taco Bell, or Kentucky Fried Chicken, all washed down with Pepsi. And increasingly, lunchtime at school means those foods too. About 20 percent of our nation's schools have sold chain restaurants the right to put their food items on the lunch line. Many schools also allow candy and soft-drink vending machines on their campuses. The National Soft Drink Association reports that 60 percent of public and private middle schools and high schools make sodas available for purchase.

Believe me, when I was a kid, if the lunch line had offered me a couple of slices of double-crust stuffed pepperoni-sausage pizza instead of a Turkey Submarine, I would have said yes before you could say the words "clogged arteries." And when I needed a mid-afternoon pick-me-up, I would have gladly traded a handful of change for a Coke and a Snickers bar.

And then I would have gone back into algebra class and spent the hour bouncing between a sugar high and a fat-induced coma°.

13 Stopping off at Taco Bell for an occasional Seven-Layer Burrito is one thing. But when fast food becomes the staple° of young people's diets, it's the kids who become Whoppers. And it has become the staple for many. According to researchers at Children's Hospital in Boston, during any given week, three out of four children eat a fast-food meal one or more times a day. The beverages they chug down are a problem, too. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says that every day, the average adolescent drinks enough soda and fruit beverages to equal the sugar content of 50 chocolate-chip cookies.

14 The problem isn't only that burgers, fries, and sodas aren't nutritious to begin with—although they aren't. What has made the situation much worse is the increasingly huge portions sold by fast-food restaurants. Back when McDonald's began business, its standard meal consisted of a hamburger, two ounces of French fries, and a 12-ounce Coke. That meal provided 590 calories. But today's customers don't have to be satisfied with such modest portions. For very little more money, diners can end up with a quarter-pound burger, extra-large fries, and an extra-large cup of Coke that add up to 1,550 calories. A whole generation of kids is growing up believing that this massive shot of fat, sugar, and sodium equals a "normal portion." As a result, they're becoming extra large themselves.

15 As kids sit down to watch the after-school and Saturday-morning shows designed for them, they aren't just taking in the programs themselves. They're seeing at least an hour of commercials for every five hours of programming. On Saturday mornings, nine out of ten of those commercials are for sugary cereals, fast foods, and other non-nutritious junk. Many of the commercials are tied in with

popular toys or beloved cartoon characters or movies aimed at children. Watching those commercials makes the kids hungry—or at least they think they're hungry. (Thanks to all the factors mentioned here, many children can no longer tell if they're genuinely hungry or not. They've been programmed to eat for many reasons other than hunger.) So they snack as they sit in front of the TV set. Then at mealtime, they beg to go out for more junk food. And they get bigger, and bigger, and bigger.

There is no overnight solution to the 16 problem of American children's increasing weight and decreasing level of physical fitness. But can anything be done? To begin with, fast-food meals and junk-food vending machines should be banned from schools. Our education system should be helping children acquire good nutritional habits, not assisting them in committing slow nutritional suicide.

In addition, commercials for junk 17 food should be banned from TV during children's viewing time, specifically Saturday mornings.

And finally, fast-food restaurants 18 should be required to do what tobacco companies—another manufacturer of products known to harm people's health—have to do. They should display in their restaurants, and in their TV and print ads as well, clear nutritional information about their products. For instance, a young woman at Burger King who was considering ordering a Double Whopper with Cheese, a king-size order of fries and a king-size Dr. Pepper could read something like this:

— *Your meal will provide 2030 calories, 860 of those calories from fat.*

— *Your recommended daily intake is 2000 calories, with no more than 600 of those calories coming from fat.*

19 At a glance, then, the customer could see that in one fast-food meal, she was taking in more calories and fat than she should consume in an entire day.

20 Overweight kids today become overweight adults tomorrow. Overweight adults are at increased risk for heart

disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer. Schools, fast-food restaurants, and the media are contributing to a public-health disaster in the making. Anything that can be done to decrease the role junk food plays in kids' lives needs to be done, and done quickly.