

# Feeding Children Well

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*People, not least parents, have become concerned about the increasing proportion of obese and overweight children in wealthier countries. It has even been called an epidemic. Can biology and anthropology deepen our understanding of childhood feeding and suggest possible solutions? Tina Moffat certainly thinks so.*

**Tina Moffat:** My name is Tina Moffat. I'm an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at McMaster University. I've done comparative studies of infant and young child feeding in Nepal, Canada, France and Japan.

**Jeremy:** So to get one thing out of the way, because I didn't just want to know about what children eat in different countries, I asked Tina Moffat to tell me about the average lunch at an elementary school in France.

**Tina Moffat:** I went to a variety of schools. They were quite different, and it was interesting to see the different approaches in France. So for example, in one of the arrondissements in Paris that I visited, they did all of their cooking, cooking from scratch in the schools. They had kitchens, they had cooks, everything was from scratch. They would buy a cow that was organically raised and used the meat for the different schools in that district. They were very, kind of, purist about it and they were rather critical of some of the other districts that had actually food come in from a company. I sampled one of the lunches and one of those schools where they had the food coming from outside. And I have to say it was still quite good, much better than anything I'd ever tasted anywhere else. I was impressed with that.

But of course, the schools where they were making food from, from scratch was really amazing. And so the lunches tend to consist ... They always have some kind of appetiser where they would have some kind of fruit or salad and then a main course which consists of either

some kind of meat or fish or a vegetarian dish and then vegetables with it and then cheese to finish, or ... and yogurt. And always baguette bread, you know, everywhere, that children can take, and water to drink. So that's what all of the lunches consisted of in some form or other. I mean, it was a lunch that I enjoyed eating and the kids seemed to eat it and enjoyed it.

**Jeremy:** And not that many French children are overweight, but, you know, cause and effect. I'm not going to jump to any conclusions, and neither does Tina Moffatt. Still, one of the reasons her book is so interesting is that around the world, especially in richer countries, we have been seeing a rise in childhood obesity. And that's worrying because of the ill health associated with obesity in adults. That rise in childhood obesity has been called an epidemic. And that seemed like a good place to start. Is it really an epidemic?

**Tina Moffat:** No! That would be my resounding answer. It's being constructed as an epidemic because there was definitely a big increase in levels of childhood obesity beginning somewhere around the early 1980s and accelerating into the 21st century. But just because there's an increase in something doesn't mean it's an epidemic.

The reason why I'm very uncomfortable with the the use of epidemic when referring to childhood obesity is because it really then puts us into a crisis mode. And it implies that we have to do something very quick and sort of magic-bullet type of approach similar to the way we've approached the COVID 19 pandemic, right? We come up with vaccines, drugs, that sort of thing. Whereas childhood obesity is, as as I lay out in my book, is much more connected to larger social structures and social conditions and problems with our food system. So there are no drugs, there are no vaccines, there are no magic bullets that are going to to tackle this problem. It's really much wider and more complex and it's going to take more thoughtful responses to it.

**Jeremy:** But in response to the kind of crisis thinking people blame this or that, you know: it's sugar, it's fat, it's ultra-processed foods. Is it even possible to blame any one thing or, as you seem to suggest, is it the food system in general?

**Tina Moffat:** I think you can point to some things that have been happening within our food system or the changes in our food system

over the time that obesity has increased. And certainly the rise in ultra-processed foods, the increased consumption of sugar, more sedentary lifestyles, those are certainly ... I'm not going to discount those as factors. But I think what happens is if you start sort of focusing on just those sort of unique causal factors, then you start to also focus on individuals in terms of childhood obesity. It's usually the parents that are implicated. Yeah. You lose sight, as you say, of those larger food system issues that we really do have to think about before we can begin to tackle any of those specific factors.

**Jeremy:** Does does an obese child turn into an obese adult or ... I mean, were obese adults, generally obese as children?

**Tina Moffat:** Yeah. So that's the interesting thing. I mean, there haven't been that many studies of it. Obviously, it's not an easy thing to do. You have to follow people longitudinally or have good retrospective data to look at. But the few studies that have come out show that not all obese children become obese adults, and most of the obese adults in the world today were not obese children. So, yeah, again, there's this kind of deterministic and foreboding kind of approach to childhood obesity, which makes it sound like it's inevitable that these children will sort of follow this lifelong trajectory.

**Jeremy:** When I was a slightly pudgy child, there was this thing called puppy fat, and you grew out of it. Whatever happened to that idea?

**Tina Moffat:** Yeah, that's a really good point. Even now, babies are designed to be fat, they need the fat. I mean, I'm not talking about overweight or obese, but they look, you know, the healthy baby looks a little, as you said, they have the puppy fat. And that's really important for the development of the brain. So when we start getting really freaked out about childhood obesity, then we start targeting toddlers and worrying about them being slightly pudgy. What we risk is if we start worrying, you know, perhaps making children disordered eating or eaters. If they're worrying about dieting at a young age, then we risk that they actually do become obese later on because they start having a very unhealthy relationship with their food and their eating.

**Jeremy:** One of the changes, I guess it sort of predates this rise in childhood obesity ... But when did food manufacturers start to produce foods targeting children specifically?

**Tina Moffat:** It really began to happen post World War Two, when there was this ...And into the 1950s, when there was this Vitamania craze, where people were really concerned about their children being malnourished. Advertisers picked up on parents being concerned about their children being malnourished, developing different drinks. And eventually breakfast cereals became really, I think, one of the most intense foods that were intensely marketed to children and were fortified with different micronutrients.

**Jeremy:** One of the big problems with cereals, breakfast cereals marketed to children is added sugar. I don't know if you saw a very recent report from the USDA on added sugars in school meals. Did you see that?

**Tina Moffat:** I didn't actually, I have to look that up.

**Jeremy:** In the US, almost all school breakfasts and a large majority of school lunches contain more than 10% of calories as added sugars. And that 10% is supposed to be a ceiling, not some target. I find that astonishing.

**Tina Moffat:** It is. It is. And again, this is back to, I guess, my contention that we do not value the the amount of investment we should put into children's food. So the types of foods that are delivered at school meal programs in the States in particular do not have the nourishment that they should have. They are, as you say, highly sugared. They're cheap. They're cheap foods. And it's not surprising because the cheaper foods are full of sugar. Right? Because those are the foods that are easily mass produced. They're appealing to the masses and they are used in these programs for children. And I should say in Canada, where we have no government subsidised meal programs, a lot of the food is donated. And so, again, these donations are often the cheap cereals that people think are going to be appealing to children and then therefore, they're served at these programs.

**Jeremy:** A lot of parents are kind of terrified of feeding their children because the children are, you know, what they call picky eaters.

**Tina Moffat:** Yes.

**Jeremy:** What's that about?

**Tina Moffat:** Yes, it's, again, I guess something I've been very interested in as an anthropologist, because my cross-cultural approach shows that it's not always the case that children [parents] are terrified of feeding their children. And so my time spent in France, I can tell you that the parents are not afraid of feeding their children. And for the most part, children eat what their parents tell them they're going to eat and is on offer.

**Jeremy:** There is a very well known phenomenon of neophobia that, you know, omnivores like people don't necessarily eat lots of something they haven't come across. Is that something children do share universally as opposed to picky eating?

**Tina Moffat:** Absolutely. And it usually starts somewhere around the time when the child starts becoming mobile. And about six months on, you know, they're able to stuff things in their mouth. And, you know, obviously they're not feeding themselves still, but they are able to test out what's in the environment. And so it's probably a good thing. It's probably an evolutionary thing that children do start to become suspect of what's out there. And even the food that their parents might be giving them, they're fussy about or concerned about. They don't want to necessarily eat. And that's natural. And that goes on sort of into the the toddler years.

But that doesn't mean that it needs to continue, because as children become more cognitively aware of what they should and shouldn't be eating, as they keep trying different foods. I mean, I think that's the thing that we should be teaching parents, is that it's okay if your child rejects a food once or twice or even 15 times, which is quite normal. Just keep offering it because at some point they probably will eat it if it's good food.

Unfortunately, a lot of parents have become, you know ... assume that means that their child is not going to ... doesn't like that food and won't like it for their life. And they start offering them very simple foods that they know they'll eat. I guess, again, a sort of a fear. And again, I think it's sort of a primal fear that your child will starve. Right. That somehow you won't be able to to nourish them. But other cultures don't seem to do that, right, necessarily. Again, there's sort of more confidence that their child will eat, that they won't starve if the food is there, then they'll eventually come around to eating it.

**Jeremy:** It is strange, if you go to a restaurant in North America, England, certainly; you have this phenomenon of parents asking the children what the children would like, as if the child not merely has agency but knows what's good for it. And I wonder how valid that is.

**Tina Moffat:** Yeah. I mean, it's certainly a ... You know, I'm certainly not advocating that we go back to the sort of model of some maybe 1950s parenting, where, you know, you must eat everything on your plate and you won't get dessert if you don't eat everything. I think that becomes punitive and overly harsh and that eating issues arise from that as well. So I'm not advocating that, but it's definitely a balance. There's a give and take. And I think some of the the experts who deal with children's eating disorders, which are becoming more and more a problem, will talk about this sort of thing; like, you've got some choices, but there's a range. There are limits on those choices. So you can have pasta or you can have soup and you can choose, but you're not going to have the cheeseburger or the hotdog tonight. That's not an option.

**Jeremy:** You do say in the book, you recognise something that I think I found very interesting, which is you say that children have special nutritional needs, but they don't have special food needs. Can you expand on that?

**Tina Moffat:** Yeah, Thank you for bringing that up, because I think it's an important point that I think we miss sometimes or we confuse. Right. So children do have special nutritional needs. They are growing rapidly. For their size, they require more nutrients, you know, compared to adults. Obviously, they overall require less food. But relative to their size, they require more. And they also have small tummies. You know, they can't eat a huge meal necessarily. So they have to eat sort of more frequent meals. And those meals have to be nutrient dense. Right.

So I give ... The example in the book is calcium, right? So children obviously require calcium. And so, yeah, for their age they require — and the size of their bodies — they require more. Those are special nutritional needs. And I think everybody who's feeding a child needs to be aware of those. But you can get all of those nutrients within the food that everybody else is eating in the family. You don't have to have these special foods. And yet again, the marketers prey on our insecurities and they start to market us things like toddler milk.

So toddler milk is this special milk for toddlers once they've finished formula or breastfeeding and it has more nutrients in it. It also has sugar in it, of course, But it's supposed to be perfect for the growing toddler who requires more nutrients, when in reality that toddler can get all the toddler needs from regular milk if they're drinking milk and all the other foods that are available that also contain calcium, for example, such as tofu, broccoli, etc.

**Jeremy:** Okay. If childhood obesity is is not actually an epidemic, but it is maybe not such a great thing, where should we be looking to change things? Is it the individual, the mother, the parents, or is it the food system? I'm intrigued by attempts to ban advertising to children, for example. I don't know whether they work. Is that something that most countries should be trying?

**Tina Moffat:** I think so. And there could be definitely a healthy debate around that. And we actually have this really interesting example in Canada, where we have Quebec, our province of Quebec, has a ban on childhood advertising, whereas the rest of Canada doesn't. One study I did find, which was very well done, did show that there was definitely lower fast food consumption for francophone children, who were not getting the childhood advertising, and their French TV didn't apply to Anglophones because they get TV from elsewhere.

So it wasn't ... You can't really block out advertising. I think it is something we should be working on. Having said that, it's really hard and it's getting harder and harder with all the different media coming out. Many children aren't watching conventional TV anymore. They're watching YouTube and various other channels, streaming channels. So it becomes harder for sure for governments to monitor all that. But I do think there's something to be said for doing that. And I also think we need to work on policies about, as you mentioned earlier, the level of sugar in children's food and what's allowable. It's just crazy that breakfast cereal is the same amount of sugar as eating a chocolate bar. Just give your child a chocolate bar, you know, because it's not going to be much better.

**Jeremy:** I'm not going to be taking that out of context. But if this epidemic talk is about fear and crisis and everything else more generally, how should we be thinking about childhood obesity?

**Tina Moffat:** You know, there are some who who go very far into the sort of constructionist approach to obesity in general and just say this is sort of being manufactured by the medical community, that we really don't have ... It's not as much of a problem as everyone's talking about, and there's a lot of harm being done to people who are overweight or obese. I don't think we should just discount it. I think it is an issue. And we need to we need to take it seriously. But I don't think, again, back to what I was saying earlier, I don't think there are any quick fixes. I think we have to think about children as not just where they are now, but where they're going in their lives. And so, you know, as humans, we teach our children, we educate them. It's a cultural process, right? So we model for them. We model what eating is, what food is. And again, this goes back to what I talk about in the book with the French approach for their school lunches, where they're very much modelling what a good French meal consists of in their school lunch programs. And children are learning that at a young age.

The intervention programs of the last 20 years have been very much: we're going into a school, we're going to set up this program, we're going to make kids do all this exercise, we're going to teach them about healthy eating. And then a year later, we're going to weigh them and see if they lost any weight. And that's absolutely the wrong approach. I mean, that's such a short term, you know, attempt to make people lose weight, which we know, too, that dieting, losing weight quickly is usually not going to be very successful for the long term because more often than not, people put the weight back on. Right. It really has to be this kind of thinking much more globally and broadly about how we're teaching our children to eat and what to eat. And that has to happen right from the start. And yes, parents obviously have a role to play in that, but we can't just let them do it on their own or expect every parent to become enlightened when they have a million other things to do in their lives and a million other problems besides whether their children are eating too much sugar.

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