

# Healthy dietary habits: A family affair

*Pediatrician Stelios Papaventis talks to Kathimerini about poor nutrition and advises parents how to deal with kids' dislikes*

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**W**orld Food Day will be celebrated on October 16. Established in 1979 at a conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the aim of this day is to make people aware of the world food problem and to garner solidarity against world poverty and hunger.

Over the last two decades, World Food Day has also come to remind people, especially in the West, about the huge problem of poor and unhealthy dietary habits. It seems a paradox but it's true. While people in many underdeveloped countries continue to live in poverty and poor sanitary conditions as well as perishing from shortages of basic commodities such as food or water, people in the Western world are suffering the other extreme, in many cases putting their lives at risk, due to diet-related diseases, with obesity taking the lead by far. The problem here in Greece has taken on huge and alarming dimensions as well, as was revealed by a recent study according to which 35.2 percent of the general population is overweight, with 22.5 percent being obese. However the main concern is the high percentage of obesity among children, which is steadily increasing. According to the World Food Organization (WFO), in 2005 some 1.6 billion children worldwide aged 15 and older were found to be overweight, while 400,000 children were described as obese. This number is expected to double by 2015, according to WFO estimates. Experts are sounding the alarm to those primarily responsible for this situation. As the ancient physician Hippocrates advised, prevention is better than cure.

Stelios Papaventis, a pedi-



**Pediatrician Stelios Papaventis (above) is the author of Greek book 'Endowed Children, Inspired Parents: For a Different Preschool Nutrition.'** He says kids should be taught to eat healthy foods from an early age.

atrician and international board-certified lactation consultant, spoke to Kathimerini and provided some ideas and advice about improving children's eating habits, while also explaining how parents can nurture a healthy attitude toward food in their child.

**How do you explain the fact that though contemporary parents are very close to their children and show great interest in their education and activities, they often neglect nutrition issues?**

This is due to the lack of information and systematic advice available. The family doctor, especially the pediatrician, is the key person who can provide the family with responsible parenting advice and teach them about the benefits of good nutrition.

First of all, pediatricians should encourage mothers to breastfeed and avoid using large amounts of milk formula. It is also recommended that the mother promote the idea of proper mealtimes and stops bottle-feeding at the preschool age.

**Once-sacred family mealtimes with home-cooked hot food seems to have become a thing of the past. To what extent has this contributed to changes in eating habits?**

The fact that traditional meals have been replaced by prepackaged or fast food has contributed a lot toward unhealthy eating habits. Parents should try to find the time to prepare and eat breakfast with their kids while helping them to build a healthy attitude

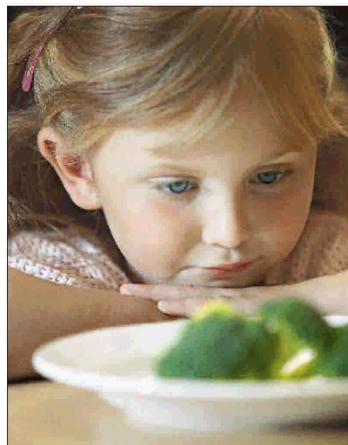
toward food from an early age.

**What should parents do to persuade their child of the benefits of good nutrition?**

First of all, parents should show the way by being good role models for their children. Regardless of what parents may say, a child will imitate what they do, not do what they say. When it comes to children, what counts in the long run is not "do as you are told" but "do as I do."

**What should parents do when their child refuses to eat healthy foods such as pulses, greens and fruits, a common problem in Greek families?**

There are many ways to prevent nutrition difficulties. To start with, breastfeeding brings an infant into contact with various



lend an ear to our child's real needs and get to know his or her dislikes and particular characteristics while avoiding making comparisons to other children. Parents should also avoid pressuring children.

**Is obesity the result of overconsumption or of eating bad foods?**

Both can lead to obesity. But today's lifestyle is also to blame, which forces children to spend most of the day sitting at a desk or on the couch watching TV. Still, I insist that the right or the wrong eating habits are established at a very early age in a child's life.

**What common mistakes do parents usually make as far as their children's nutrition is concerned?**

Encouraging children to pay attention to their real needs regarding the amount of food they eat is what parents should do in the first place. We should help our child to develop responsible and independent behavior.

From the very beginning, when being breastfed, a child should be allowed to have full control over the amount of food it needs. The same happens when, later, as an infant, it first attempts to hold a spoon or fork to eat without assistance. At this age, the child needs to taste and experiment with foods, to determine what or how much he or she needs to eat.

The problem at this point is usually the reaction of the mother, who imposes rules without listening to her child. Such authoritative behavior could lead to food-related disorders, such as obesity or anorexia nervosa, depending on the child's temperament.

*"Stelios Papaventis is also the author of the book 'Endowed Children, Inspired Parents: For a Different Preschool Nutrition,' recently released by Patakis Publishers.*

tastes in the mother's system, aiding in the transition to the family dining table. Dietary habits are established and can be improved upon within the first two or three years of a child's life. Moreover, parents must try to get their children to taste all categories of healthy foods while avoiding milk or juice powders, ready-to-eat mixes or products with sweeteners. Personal example is also a determining factor in nurturing a healthy attitude toward food. So, as parents, we too must be very careful what we eat, what we buy at the supermarket and what we serve. When a child rejects healthy foods, we should come up with smart tactics to get them to eat such foods. No shouting or excessive criticism is needed. In-

stead, parents should respect their child's preferences while giving him or her the chance to have a say in grocery shopping and food preparation. Another alternative is to incorporate healthy foods into kids' favorite meals. We should always remember that all children go through a phase where they reject or dislike certain types of food. This could be temporary or become permanent, depending on the stance of the parents.

**Is good nutrition only a matter of training? From your experience, what else should parents take into account?**

Personality, temperament as well as biorhythms are also determining factors that parents need also to take into account. We must