

The Role of Food Education in Childhood Obesity [Book Review of *French Kids Eat Everything*]

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Karen Le Billon's *French Kids Eat Everything* is more than an amusing account of her family's move from Vancouver, British Columbia to her husband's hometown in northern France for a year. Le Billon describes the culture shock she experienced upon realizing that her two young daughters' eating habits were entirely incompatible with those of French children. For example, she shares her experience of being forbidden from packing her daughters' school lunches in lieu of the elaborate meal served at school. She was stunned by French school-age children's willingness to consume a diverse array of foods, from asparagus to aïoli, shrimp to soufflé, and nearly everything in between. To her dismay, she was even reprimanded for trying to slip her youngest a harmless snack: "It's a recipe for obesity!", she was lectured. How could she keep her daughters, who flee from the table when a food they do not like appears, from starving to death in this diverse food culture? Le Billon takes her readers on a journey of discovery as she articulates ten food rules by which the French appear to successfully abide. The first rule, exploring food education, provides a foundation upon which the other nine rules are built.

Le Billon describes how, in French, "education" includes knowledge acquired through formal schooling as well as the habits, tastes, manners and behaviours developed through discipline in the home. She rationalizes the wisdom inherent in French education as it relates to food: eating is one of the first acts an infant performs consciously and independently, even prior to walking and talking. Firm, but gentle guidance provided at this critical time and throughout childhood is essential to establish the foundation for healthy eating for the rest of a child's life. Le Billon provides her readers with a sobering reminder:

Chances are, my children are not going to grow up to go to Harvard or to be major league sports stars, concert musicians, or NASA astronauts. But no matter who they grow up to be, how and what my children eat will be of great importance to their health, happiness, success, and longevity.¹

Le Billon provides a plethora of anecdotes, statistics, and personal observations to demonstrate to readers how the conceptual framework of food education manifests itself. For instance, readers might be surprised to learn that the French spend about twice as much time eating as do Americans. In her book, Le Billon argues that this time is well

spent. Children are taught from a young age that meals embody a time for people to come together and take part in a special occasion. Food is always eaten around a table, never on the run, and tables are never barren, always adorned. In short, the French have a respectful and meaningful approach to food.

An important subject discussed at length by Le Billon is *from whom* the French children learn this approach to meals. Food education is incorporated in the curriculum of the French school system. In the classroom, teachers play an active role in opening the minds of children to food as a culture, art, and national heritage. It is here that basic principles of food habits, hygiene, and nutrition are introduced to children. In the cafeteria, these rules are put into practice. Tables are adorned with cloth and cutlery, students collectively gather, and the same three-course meal prepared by an in-house chef is served to all. Subsidization for low-income families is provided, so that no child brings lunch from home.

Furthermore, the French government plays an active role in supporting food education. Selective regulations in the production, marketing, and sale of food to children are strictly enforced. Le Billon notes the resemblance between warnings found on North American cigarette packs and those which appear on a white banner accompanying snack ads on television: "for your health, avoid snacking between meals."

What becomes clear from Le Billon's identification of those who educate the children is that no one party is solely responsible for this task. Importantly, lessons taught by parents are reinforced by teachers, and supported by the school system and the French government. Despite her thorough analysis of the French system of food education, Le Billon only skims the surface when it comes to exploring how food education is carried out in North America, and for good reason. North America, and particularly the United States, lacks a framework that fosters collaboration amongst different parties involved in the health of children.

Le Billon's book might have benefited from a chapter devoted to a focused discussion of the issue of obesity as a public health problem. The inclusion of such a chapter would not have significantly altered the tone of her memoir, but would have provided her readers with the opportunity

to think critically about the issues at hand and might have assisted them in placing her experiences within the broader context of public health. To achieve this, Le Billon might have drawn parallels between the French and North American school systems, concepts of parenting, and legislation regulating marketing and advertisement. Addressing discrepancies between the two systems and highlighting the consequences of these disparities would have allowed Le Billon to begin a conversation exploring why obesity is a problem that matters.

Host of *French Food at Home*, Laura Calder, considers Le Billon's memoir "a book about how to help build and maintain the foundations of any civilized society." What we lack is that foundation. Attempts to foster healthy eating habits by parents in the home are foiled by television advertisements that push kids to consume fat-laden and sugar-infused snacks. Pressured from school boards to improve math and science scores on standardized tests, schools (particularly in the United States) have drastically reduced time for physical education² and have all but eliminated courses on home economics.³

In 2012, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the incidence of childhood obesity in the United States to be roughly 20%.⁴ A systematic analysis conducted in 2013 revealed that the incidence of childhood obesity in France was amongst the lowest of all industrialized countries: a mere 5%.⁵ It is now predicted that this genera-

tion's children will be the first to live shorter lives than their parents.⁶ At no other time have we needed more the cooperation of governments, schools, and parents to ensure the health of the youngest members of our society. Le Billon's memoir brings to light what can be accomplished if all levels of society identify a common goal and make a whole-hearted and collaborative effort to achieve it. The first step toward teaching our children the vital life skill of healthy eating is realizing that this is a collective responsibility. Most nations facing an obesity epidemic have yet to take this first step.

References

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