

Nutrition at schools

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Before the summer, an agreement between the Ministry of Health and Education was reached regarding a program to improve children's food at schools. This is an appropriate initiative since school is a **privileged location** for students to gain knowledge related to health and nutrition.

The first part is referred to **school canteens**, which are defined as an educational service that complements formation. There are recommendations about: the frequency with which different foods shall be served taking into account children's needs, the advantages of avoiding fried food, the kind of fats which are to be advised, the time dedicated to food or the need to account for special situations as some illnesses, allergies or religious belief when scheduling week menus.

However, the most important conclusion for media was the project to control other foods that underage can buy at school in **canteens, stands or vending machines**.

For health professionals, this is a proper initiative.

Current society has increased the prevalence of obesity a lot, as well as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. This is all related to food. Risks begin from childhood, when habits begin their existence.

It is important that family and carers worry about their children's food, which must be healthy and balanced. Then, foods at school and at home have to be healthy. The beginning of home food is in a trolley, then in a larder and in the table. School includes canteen, stands and vending machines. Both settings must offer fruits, vegetables, legumes, balanced stews, bread and dairy products. If there is consistency, schoolchildren will have them and will learn that they are healthy food. On the contrary, if they can find chocolates, ice creams, pastries, packed juices and soft drinks within easy reach, it is likely that they prefer these products since sweet is a very popular flavour. And they still do not know what is beneficial or not for their nutrition.

Furthermore, we believe that is necessary to make bigger efforts to provide families with nutritional education so that they know week menus as well as the reasons behind that scheduled menu, how to complement them with dinner and keys and suggestions to make family food healthier.

It is also crucial that **physical activity** must be increased

and out school in day-to-day life. Children and their families should know that being active, playing, running and practising sport is ideal for body health. It improves humour, makes integration easier and helps to prevent chronic illnesses.

It is then normal that **industries** complain since they are afraid to lose a sales sector. With this kind of news, it seems as if their products were negative and when the *estrategia Naos*¹ was published (a Ministry of Health program, in 2005, to prevent obesity) it was pointed out that "there are no good or bad foods, but well or badly balanced diets".

We must insist: children must not make decisions on their nutrition although they are bombed with advertisements. There are products "for them" even though they are not necessary and they are in the list of food to be consumed occasionally. To sum up, they have not a proper age to understand nutritional information, they do not know what a healthy menu or a balanced diet are. Hence, it is logical to protect them. Someone has to help them to choose what is healthier and it is proper to ensure that what they have within easy reach is. To widen options, food with an excessive amount of fats and sugars must be put aside.

However, banning some products is not enough for some parents and their children. It is very important to inform and to raise an awareness in families. We must explain them the aims of these ideas and design other to have healthiest choices available: more cycleways to move in cities and towns, safe parks to play outdoors, facilities with adapted timetables to practise sport after school or after working, low prices policy for fresh products, especially fruits and vegetables.

We think it is necessary that one of the first actions must be **inform families**, with a clear and concise language, about the aspects which worry public health officers related to health and children nutrition (they will be adults in the future). If people have clear and true information, they will be able to make decisions when choosing a healthy menu.

1. Strategy for nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention. Ministry of Health. 2005. Available in: <http://www.naos.aesan.msp.es/naos/ficheros/investigacion/publicacion1estrategianaos.pdf>

However, even for those who have clear ideas, there are many factors which are **barriers to make a healthy and balanced** nutrition. For instance, different work and school timetables that avoid making usual family meals. Or more lenient educative styles, each member of the family eat what they want. Or the pressure of advertisements and tempting offers, which include attractive prices. In our world, it is very difficult to “eat healthily” because there are a lot of opportunities to eat more than what is needed: tempting food, cheap and easy to find, with a lot of calories, parties and celebrations nearly every week, restaurants with 2x1 offers machines, stands, self-services and so on.

From “**Asociación Española de Pediatría de Atención Primaria**” (AEPap) we would like to contribute with comments and explanations that help families to understand the aim of these public health campaigns.

From AEPap, these are our **family recommendations**

- 1) It is essential to begin your day with a **good** breakfast.
- 2) If you have a good breakfast, you do not really need to take any snacks since, a few hours later, lunch will be served. **Break is for playing.**

- 3) The healthiest snack for breaks is **fruit** or a sandwich. You can also have yogurt or milk. However, we can notice that children have few fruits and dairy products a day. It is good to give them another chance to have fruits.
- 4) **Water is the best drink.** It calms your thirst, it does not produce caries, it is not fattening and you do not lose your appetite if you have it. All the other sweet drinks have these effects.
- 5) **Nutritional pyramids** offer a guide about the frequency of having different kinds of foods. The basis is formed by foods to be consumed daily and in the top part, we can find those for occasional consumption (less than once a week). There we can find ice creams, pastries, soft drinks, chocolates, cakes, sweets, sugars and fats.
- 6) **Physical activity** is a health source and it improves humour and self-esteem. It is proper that at least an hour of physical activity is made a day and this is better if the activity is outdoors.

Furthermore, in coming editions of our magazine, some articles related to food will be published.



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