



Why Teen-Age Girls Don't Eat Properly

A medical authority says they'd rather starve than be "fat"; what's worse, their parents don't know how to set them right

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SHE LIVED next door to us. Her name was Anne. As a child she was robust and chubby, and had lovely golden curls. In her adolescence, though, she was unattractively thin. One day I asked: "Anne, what did you have for breakfast this morning?"

"I didn't have any breakfast."

"Well, then," I asked, "what did you have for breakfast yesterday morning?"

"I didn't have any breakfast yesterday either."

"Okay," I insisted, "and when did you have breakfast?"

"I can't remember."

"Well, what did you have for lunch at school?"

"I took a tuna-fish sandwich and an orange, and I bought a bottle of milk at school."

I was just about to say that that wasn't a bad lunch, when she added, "I ate half the sandwich and drank some of the milk."

"What about the orange?" I demanded.

"Oh," she answered, "that's in my locker at school."

Since I am a hard man to discourage, I pursued the subject of her evening meal.

"We-ell," she said, "I didn't like what we had for supper, so I made an excuse about doing some homework, and I—I guess I didn't eat very much of anything."

This last remark will not surprise parents or nutrition experts. They know that most adolescent girls do not eat enough, or choose their foods wisely enough, to assure good nutrition. Growing boys, who are always hungry, do much better, perhaps because they will eat anything that won't bite them.

Why should young girls develop unsatisfactory food habits?

The main reason is that young girls would rather starve than get "fat"! Slenderness, often to the point of emaciation, is a must with them. It is no use telling them that they are healthier—and better looking—at normal weight. Fashion, custom, and above all, the approval of their own age group are more important than any health considerations. Who wants to be a "square" with her own set?

ANOTHER REASON why the teen-age girl does not eat properly is that the adult approach to the problem is wrong. "Eat carrots because they are good for you," says mother *ad nauseam*. Or worse, "How many times do I have to tell you—eat those carrots." If there is any mule in the child's disposition, this approach is sure to bring it into action.

Too much bullying at the table creates unnecessary rebellion toward food. We talk too much about rigid dietary "musts" and not enough about how good-to-eat a sensible diet can be. We are too negative, especially in relation to sweets and soft drinks, which young people take to like ducks to water. It's no use to tell any young person not to have sweets and soft drinks. Fruits, vegetables, whole-grain cereals, vitamins, and minerals just don't have the appeal of a cheeseburger or a thick malted milk. And what's wrong with popcorn, peanuts, hot dogs, and ice cream?

The fact is, all these foods are good and useful—in their places. The problem is to have them used by youngsters in proper relationship to other foods. But this balance can be achieved only by parents who understand psychology as well as nutrition.

My judgment, based on long and sympathetic

contact with young people, is that the right approach is to let them have the facts, then work out their own conclusions. For example, they should be given six basic tips in good nutrition:

Eat a good breakfast; you need morning energy for good work.

There are many varieties of food, so choose the kind you like among fruits, vegetables, meats, fish, eggs, and other important foods.

Go easy on sweets; no need to cut them out, but don't substitute them for more essential foods.

Take enough time to enjoy your meals.

Put worries and problems aside while you eat; keep mealtimes happy.

Learn to like as many varieties of food as possible to make sensible eating fun.

But don't din your ideas about diet into their ears. If we give young people a scientific basis for good dietary practice, they'll pick them up themselves without nagging.

After all, young people are eager to look well. They want to be liked and to be popular. Who doesn't? Help them learn that good health, including good nutrition, is an aid toward this goal, and they will act like anybody else at any age.

It all adds up to simple but often-overlooked principles. You have to like people; you have to have confidence in people; you have to respect the personality of the individual—if you expect to help and to influence his conduct, even for his own good.

Substitute "youth" in the above sentence for "people," and I believe you have the answer, not only to the question as to why adolescent girls don't eat more sensibly, but to many other questions about the younger generation.

COVER:

Today's striking cover photo by Ozzie Sweet captures a familiar ritual of the yuletide season—the tree being taken to the church. Somehow, the simple scene makes one feel that faith can restore well-being, even in a world so filled with unrest.

Family Weekly / December 13, 1959

LEONARD S. DAVIDOW President and Publisher
WALTER C. DREYFUS Vice President
PATRICK E. O'ROURKE Advertising Director

Send all advertising communications to
Family Weekly, 153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.
Address all communications about editorial features to
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

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