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How America's Children Packed On the Pounds

By Jeffrey Kluger

Americans disagree about a lot of things, but we rarely quarrel when it comes to our food. For a nation built on grand democratic virtues, there is still nothing that defines us quite like our love of chow time.

We have plenty of reasons to fetishize our food — not the least being that we've always had so much of it. Settlers fleeing the privations of the Old World landed in the new one and found themselves on a fat, juicy center cut of continent, big enough to baste its coasts in two different oceans. The prairies ran so dark with buffalo, you could practically net them like cod; the waters swam so thick with cod, you could bag them like slow-moving buffalo. The soil was the kind of rich stuff in which you could bury a brick and grow a house, and the pioneers grew plenty — fruits and vegetables and grains and gourds and legumes and tubers, in a variety and abundance they'd never seen before.

With all that, was it any wonder that when we had a chance to establish our first national holiday, it was Thanksgiving — a feast that doesn't merely accompany a celebration but in effect is the celebration? Is it any wonder that what might be our most evocative patriotic song is *America the Beautiful*, in which an ideal like brotherhood doesn't even get mentioned until the second-to-last line, well after rhapsodic references to waves of grain and fruited plains? "We've defined an American version of what it means to succeed," says neuroscientist Randy Seeley, associate director of the Obesity Research Center at the University of Cincinnati Medical School. "And a big part of that is access to an environment in which there is a lot of food to be consumed."

The problem is, all those calories come at a price. Humans, like most animals, are hardwired not just to eat but to gorge, since living in the wild means never knowing when the next famine is going to strike. Best to load up on calories when you can — even if that famine never comes. "We're not only programmed to eat a lot," says Sharma Apt Russell, author of *Hunger: An Unnatural History*, "but to prefer foods that are high in calories." What's more, the better we got at producing food, the easier it became. If you're a settler, you eat a lot of buffalo in part because you need a lot of buffalo — at least after burning so many calories hunting and killing it. But what happens when eating requires no sweat equity at all, when the grocery store is always nearby and always full?

What happens is, you get fat, and that's precisely what we've done. In 1900 the average weight of a college-age male in the U.S. was 133 lb. (60 kg); the average woman was 122 lb. (55 kg). By 2000, men had plumped up to 16 lb. (75 kg) and women to 144 lb. (65 kg). And while the small increase in average height for men (women have remained the same) accounts for a bit of that, our eating habits are clearly responsible for most. Over the past 20 years in particular, we've stuffed ourselves like pâté geese. In 1985 there were only eight states in which more than 10% of the adult population was obese — though the data collection then was admittedly spottier than it is now.

By 2006, there were no states left in which the obesity rates were that low, and in 23 states, the number exceeded 25%. Even those figures don't tell the whole story, since they include only full-blown obesity. Overall, about two-thirds of all Americans weigh more than they should.

"Sit down on a bench in a park with a person on either side of you," says Penelope Slade-Royall, director of the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. "If you're not overweight, statistically speaking, both of the other people sitting with you are."

If there was any firewall against the fattening of American adults, it was American kids. The quick metabolism and prodigious growth spurts of childhood make it a challenge just to keep up with all the calories you need, never mind exceed them. But even the most active kids could not hold out forever against the storm of food coming at them every day. In 1971 only 4% of 6-to-11-year-old kids were obese; by 2004, the figure had leaped to 18.8%. In the same period, the number rose from 6.1% to 17.4% in the 12-to-19-year-old group, and from 5% to 13.9% among kids ages just 2 to 5. And as with adults, that's just obesity. Include all overweight kids, and a whopping 32% of all American children now carry more pounds than they should. "There's no way to overestimate how scary numbers like this are," says Seeley.

Obese boys and girls are already starting to develop the illnesses of excess associated with people in their 40s and beyond: heart disease, liver disease, diabetes, gallstones, joint breakdown and even brain damage as fluid accumulation inside the skull leads to headaches, vision problems and possibly lower IQs. A staggering 90% of overweight kids already have at least one avoidable risk factor for heart disease, such as high cholesterol or hypertension. Type 2 diabetes is now being diagnosed in teens as young as 15. Health experts warn that the current generation of children may be the first in American history to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents'. "The more overweight you are, the worse all of these things will be for you," says acting U.S. Surgeon General Steven Galson. And, warns Seeley, the worse they are likely to stay: "When you're talking about morbidly obese kids, zero percent will grow up to be normal-weight adults."

It's hardly a secret how American children have come to this sickly pass. In the era of the 64-oz. soda, the 1,200-calorie burger and the 700-calorie Frappuccino, food companies now produce enough each day for every American to consume a belt-popping 3,800 calories per day, never mind that even an adult needs only 2,350 to survive. Not only are adults and kids alike consuming far more calories than they can possibly use, but they're also doing less and less with them. The transformation of American homes into high-def, Web-enabled, TiVo-equipped entertainment centers means that children who come home after a largely sedentary day at a school desk spend an average of three more sedentary hours in front of some kind of screen. Schools have contributed, with shrinking budgets causing more and more of them to slash physical-education programs. In 1991, only 42% of high school students participated in daily phys ed — already a troublingly low figure. Today that number is 25% or less.

Washington, too, is dropping the ball. Seven years ago, Congress allocated \$125 million for a smart new health campaign dubbed Verb, aimed at getting preteen kids to become more active. Boldface names such as teen star Miley Cyrus and quarterback Donovan McNabb headlined public-service ads, and volunteers set up booths at

public events. In the program's first year, up to 80% of kids polled were aware of the Verb message, and communities began sponsoring their own Verb-based activities. But that success could not survive congressional budget cuts, and the program's funding was steadily slashed. By 2007, funds were shut off altogether, and Verb was past tense.

The government insists that the decision was a fiscally prudent one and that local and state programs, like the widely publicized fitness initiatives launched by California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger or the less publicized INShape program begun in 2005 by Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, are a more efficient way to get the message out. "Obesity is not the kind of problem that is going to respond to just the flow of federal funds," says Galson. The fact is, however, that in the case of Verb, responding was precisely what it was doing — even if only a little.

In all of this, there are flickers of hope. In May, epidemiologists were thrilled when the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study of 8,165 children, which showed that for the first time in decades, the increase in U.S. childhood obesity had leveled off. It's not certain if the plateau is a sign that public-awareness programs and improved menus in many school cafeterias are producing results or merely that some kind of saturation point has been reached, with most kids genetically susceptible to gaining too much weight having done so. "Whether this is meaningful data, we don't know yet," says Seeley. "But anyone who wants to stick a flag in this and declare victory is just crazy."

Clearly, nobody is going that far. Victory may indeed come, but it will be only after a long, multifront war, one that, as the following stories in this TIME special section show, is at last being joined. Parents are fighting it in the home as they learn how to make healthier meals available to their families, set better examples with their own food choices and manage the critical issues of self-esteem that can be so disabling for overweight kids. Policymakers are fighting it as they study the growing body of research showing how everything from income to race to education plays a role in how much kids weigh and as they craft local solutions to solve these local problems. Doctors are fighting it as they deal daily with the ills associated with childhood obesity and work to repair the damage that's been done. And perhaps most important, teachers, mentors and public role models are fighting it as they help kids navigate a culture that fosters fat but idealizes thin and as they teach them that what truly counts is getting themselves as fit as their body type and genes allow — and then loving that body no matter what.

Do all these things — and do them right — and the national obesity epidemic just might be brought under control before some kids struggling with their weight today even reach middle age. "If we got this way over the last 30 years," says Galson, "it's not going to take us centuries to get back. We could reverse things at the same speed or even faster." Americans will continue to love good food; the trick will be to learn to love good health even more.

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