

**HALIBORANGE - CAMPAIGNING FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**REPORT OF THE**  
**HALIBORANGE FOOD FIGHT SURVEY**

June 2000

## **HALIBORANGE CAMPAIGNING FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

Haliborange have just recently conducted a survey to investigate children's eating habits and preferences, and offer an explanation of the effects and pressures this puts on family mealtimes.

The survey took a close look at some of the reasons behind children's eating fads and highlights the struggle parents have with their children when providing them with a nutritious and healthy diet. The results of the survey were analysed by Dr. David Lewis, leading child psychologist, who offered physiological insights and practical advice to parents to help them avoid mealtime misery.

This report was undertaken in the context of current concern about child nutrition expressed by government agencies and health professionals alike. A recent report by the Food Commission and the Department of Health identified concerns that some children are not receiving adequate amounts of vitamins A, C and D in their diet. These vitamins are essential for children's health to promote good vision, growth and concentration and are recommended by government as a daily supplement for young children from the age of three months.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

### **FOOD FAD KIDS WHO CAUSE MEALTIME MISERY**

**The Survey discovered that children who are faddy eaters are causing mealtime misery in a third of UK households while also putting their health at risk. The Haliborange survey found...**

- Two out of three children go through a stage of refusing to eat certain foods, a quarter reject a wide range of healthy eating options, while one in twenty reject almost everything set before them.
- With the need for good nutrition high on parents' agenda, they are most likely to argue when each parent takes different views on how best to encourage children to eat more healthily.
- Two thirds (65%) of the under tens refuse fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Most hated vegetables are Brussels sprouts (41%) cabbage (30%) and tomatoes (28%).
- Bananas and potatoes, by contrast, received the thumbs up from more than nine out of ten children.
- The most hated meals include anything made with garlic (21%), eggs (20%) or milk. Boys are more likely than girls to refuse any dish that has garlic in it.
- For some children colour matters more than taste with one in five (18%) rejecting anything coloured green. Such colour prejudice is most likely to be found among the eight to ten year olds (17%).
- Food fads affect more than half of all two to six year olds.

The survey also showed that parents understand why nutrition is so important and identified four types of parents who deal with fads in very different ways. It was clear that parent's approach depends on the child's age and sometimes their sex. Thus for parents to deal successfully with their child's faddy eating and ensure they eat food packed with nutrients they may have to adopt several approaches throughout their child's early life.

- **Coaxers** (45%) understand why nutrition is important and try and persuade children to eat more healthily but do not insist if they still refuse. These are more likely to be fathers than mothers (57% vs. 44%) and to be dealing with their daughters rather than their sons (49% vs. 41%). Their children are also more likely to be under five. Such parents are the most likely to be concerned to ensure that their child eats a nutritionally balanced diet. Parents who coax their child are also the most likely to say they go through periods of faddy eating (44%).
- **Detectives** (26%) try and discover why their child dislikes a rejected food. Those who adopt this approach are most likely to be worried about the consequences of a poor diet and are anxious to provide foods packed with nutrients. They are more likely to be mums than dads (27% vs. 17%) and to have children aged between five and seven (30%). They are also most likely to be younger parents. More than a third (35%) of parents under the age of twenty-five would turn food detective compared to only a quarter (24%) of those aged thirty-six and older.
- **Dictators** (7%) order their child to eat and refuse to take no for an answer. Those who admitted that this was their usual tactic were women, with the highest proportion being aged thirty-six and older. The older the child the more likely it is that a minority of parents adopt this strategy. Although less than one in twenty parents of children under five (5%) would ever insist that a disliked food was eaten, the proportion rose to one in ten (9%) with children over 5. Parents who order their child to eat are the most likely to describe

their child as a very fussy eater (41%). They are also most likely to say their child refuses to eat anything green (24%), or any dish with garlic in it (29%) and to describe food refusal as a major cause of frequent mealtime misery.

- **Diplomats** (22%) Two parents out of ten make no comment when their child refuses to eat something but simply avoid serving the disliked food again. This approach is more likely to be taken by mums than dads (27% vs. 17%) and of children aged eight to ten (26%). Diplomats are far more likely to be older than younger parents. While only one in seven (14%) of those under twenty-five adopt this approach, almost one in four parents (38%) over the age of forty do so.

## **WHY NUTRITION IS IMPORTANT**

Poor eating patterns developed in childhood can pave the way for diet-related illnesses in later life, so it is essential that a healthy eating pattern be established as early as possible. A healthy lifestyle adopted as a child can set a precedent for life.

In our fast pace society where time is often a factor, parents may need to turn to packaged foods as an alternative to cooking fresh meals. However recent studies have shown that many of these meals are misleading in nutritional value - loaded with sugar and fat. A government survey<sup>1</sup> of the diets of pre-school children showed that those eating the most sugar in their diet were likely to consume the lowest levels of many vitamins and minerals. It is easy to give a fussy eater the foods they enjoy but the wider implications can be serious.

As recommended by the government's chief medical officer, a daily complement of vitamins A, C and D is crucial to promote general health and growth, maintain healthy vision, boost the immune system and improve concentration.

<sup>1</sup> Gibson, 1997

## IDENTIFYING FOOD FADS

So what can worried parents do to help ensure their child eats a healthy, balanced diet while avoiding mealtime misery?

Psychologist David Lewis offers the following practical advice:

“If your child is a faddy eater there's no cause for concern. Fads are common, especially among young children. One study found them in more than half of all two to six year olds. However, nutritional deficiencies in the diet are important to tackle early on, so supplementing your child's diet with vitamins will give peace of mind. Your next step is to try and identify what lies behind the refusal, since this will give you the best way of tackling the root cause of the problem.”

Dr Lewis identifies 6 main food fads:

**1. Anger Fads:** Because meals symbolise intimacy and sharing, they satisfy more than physical hunger. By rejecting the food parents have worked hard to prepare, a small child could be expressing anger or resentment he or she cannot put into words. This type of fad is more likely if food has been used as a reward or a substitute for your time and attention. For instance offering a sugary treat for good behaviour or chocolate bars instead of a promised outing together. Angry fads are usually accompanied by sulking, tantrums or tearfulness. Deal with them by identifying and removing the cause of emotional distress.

**2. Independence Fads:** Refusing to eat certain foods, especially those the parent especially wants eaten, makes a small child feel more grown up and independent. Most common between the ages of five and six this type of fad usually disappears of its own accord as a child grows older. Insisting he, or she, eats everything that's put in front of them is usually counter productive. It either increases their resistance or undermines their self-esteem. Far better to

be tolerant and treat the fad as no big deal. At the same time find other ways of giving the child greater independence. For instance by allowing a say in the choice of clothes or meals.

**3. Copycat Fads:** Are common when young children look up to older brothers or sisters. Respond in a neutral manner, saying something like: "Fine, all the more for the rest of us." Dealt with tactfully, copycat fads are usually short lived.

**4. Anxiety Fads:** Paul adored pork chops until he saw the film Babe, after which he refused to touch any pork or bacon again. When faced by this type of fad never compel your child to eat a disliked food, or you could make him hate it for life. Once the anxiety has subsided, the fad should also vanish.

**5. "Strange Food" Fads:** Many children are wary of unfamiliar dishes. But strange food fads are more likely if you make disparaging remarks about the cooking. Commenting that a dish looks, or will taste disgusting, may stop your child from ever trying it. Avoid prejudging their tastes. Allow your child the chance to make up his, or her, own mind about likes and dislikes.

**6. Allergy Fads:** Long before they can explain why, children know certain foods will disagree with them. It's an instinct you should always respect. Never force a child to eat or drink anything to which he or she violently objects. Permit as much freedom in the choice of food as your budget allows. Some psychologists claim children should be allowed to eat what and whenever they please. Such "free-range" feeding, they believe, prevents obsessions about food and diet. While variety in eating is important to developing a wide range of tastes some parental control is also essential to ensure a healthy, well-balanced, diet.

## HOW TO AVOID MEALTIME MISERY

"The first step in avoiding mealtime misery is to stop worrying", advises Dr Lewis. "Remember that tastes are highly individual and often take time to acquire. Keep in mind too that appetites change with age. Recognise that what seems like a food fad may simply be a part of growing-up, which is why they are so common during the "terrible twos" and the early teenage years. Keep in mind your child's nutrition and offer as varied a diet as your budget will allow. A vitamin pill a day, such as Haliborange A, C, D or Halibonbons tablets, can be a tasty way to help compensate for any deficiencies in their diet and to give added health insurance for the family. If you feel that your child's refusal to eat is affecting their health, consult your health visitor or GP."

**Annabel Karmel**, leading author on cooking for children, has the following advice: *"Healthy eating for children is crucial as it often set their dietary pattern for life and eating healthily from a young age can help reduce the risk of developing heart disease and other illnesses."* Annabel's top tips for providing children with healthy but delicious meals include the following suggestions:

1. Only buy the foods that you want your child to eat and set an example by eating the right foods yourself.
2. Encourage your child to get involved in planning and preparing meals and maybe even help with cooking. Children who make their own packed lunchboxes are much more likely to eat them.
3. If your child doesn't like eating vegetables, create recipes that vegetables can be blended into like a tomato and vegetable sauce - what children can't see, they can't pick out. Also many children who don't like eating cooked vegetables do like eating them raw, so give carrot sticks, cucumber, sweet pepper etc with a tasty dip.

4. Many children have a poor appetite at mealtimes because they have so many in-between snacks that they never feel truly hungry. Cut out empty calories like crisps, sweet biscuits and soft drinks and give snacks that are nutritious like fresh fruit, cheese or raw vegetables instead.

5. Try to make food look attractive and fun, simple things like arranging fresh fruit in the shape of a face or cutting sandwiches into shapes using cookie cutters. We all know that children like burgers and pizzas and it's easy to make your own 'healthy' fast food.

6. Introduce children at a young age to many different foods from around the world as influencing tastes whilst young is crucial. Poor eating patterns developed in childhood pave the way for diet related illnesses later in life.

7. However unreasonable your child's eating habits, try to respond calmly. Food shouldn't be used as a means to teach a child to do as he is told. If your child refuses his meal, don't make a fuss but leave the meal in front of him, and carry on eating your own meal. He will soon realise that refusing food isn't much fun when you don't react and he doesn't get the attention he is looking for.

8. Red meat is good for children as it provides the best source of iron and iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency amongst children. It is often the texture rather than the taste of meat that children object to. To make meat easier to chew, cook minced meat and chop it in a food processor for a few seconds and then make it into dishes like spaghetti bolognese, lasagne or shepherd's pie.

9. If your child doesn't like eating meat, encourage her to eat other foods that are rich in iron like wholegrain cereals and bread, green leafy vegetables and pulses. Iron in foods of animal origin is much more easily absorbed but if you include a good source of vitamin C (e.g. kiwi fruit, orange juice) at the same meal, this will improve the absorption .

10. Don't reward good behaviour with chocolates or sweets and try to confine sweet foods to mealtimes. The bacteria present on teeth uses sugar to produce acid, which attacks tooth enamel. The more frequently sugar is consumed, the more often acid is produced.

## CASE STUDY - THE BOY WHO DIDN'T LIKE FOOD

Sue (36) a first time mother is typical of the parents identified in the Haliborange survey. Describing herself as a **coaxer**, she has consistently struggled with her 4 year old son Oscar's faddy eating habits which began at an early age after a bout of sickness. From the age of 18 months, Oscar's point blank refusal to eat (anything but sweets and milk) has been a constant cause of frustration and family mealtimes turned into a battleground on occasion. It was suggested that his lack of eating was also impacting on his developing social skills and his ability to talk coherently. To solve the problem Sue turned **detective** to find out why Oscar was refusing his food. Now aged four Oscar is a very active little boy and Sue's constant efforts with his diet are now beginning to pay off. Although he is still reluctant to eat many foods, at last peace is beginning to reign at mealtimes and "green" is back on the menu!

"Ever since Oscar could walk he has always been full of energy. He's a very happy, healthy little boy - but he just doesn't like food. This means he is small for his age -at four he is still wearing 18-24 month T-shirts and he can't wear trousers without a belt! But more of a concern was that it was suggested that his faddy eating was partly linked to his slow speech development. Because Oscar didn't like to chew food, his facial muscles weren't strong and flexible which affected his ability to form certain vowels. Getting Oscar to eat became a major preoccupation and a major disruption.

"Our problems began when at nine months Oscar was hospitalised with bronchilitis and although he made a full recovery, he failed to gain any weight for a further six months and thereafter weight gain was slow. Despite the fact that other children his age seemed to eat handfuls of sandwiches and crisps, I wasn't overly concerned because he had a voracious appetite for milk. But during another routine hospital visit at 18 months, the resident paediatrician declared Oscar to be malnourished and referred him to a Sate Registered Dietician.

"After my initial shock that my son was under nourished, I was reassured by the dietician that I was doing most things right. We made plenty of time for meals, I was offering him a variety of foods and we ate together as a family as often as possible. I had also been supplementing his diet from 3 months of age with Haliborange multivitamin syrup and more recently with those little orange chewable tablets, Haliborange vitamins A, C and D, as recommended by my health visitor.

"However, at best Oscar only ate very small amounts and he never ate vegetables - he would even avoid green pasta. Meal after meal would be left virtually untouched. Meal times were spent persuading him to eat, stress levels were rising and I found myself resorting to sweets as bribes.

"The first problem I needed to tackle was to encourage Oscar to eat more. The dietician made me realise that I was allowing him to drink too much milk - so part of the reason he didn't eat was simple - he wasn't hungry! Cutting back on milk was difficult and initially caused far more disruption than we'd previously experienced. But slowly we began to see that Oscar was more interested in his food. Sweets were kept for special occasions and instead Haliborange (which he loved) became his daily treat. To ease stress levels at the dinner table, particularly my stress levels, I realised it was important to make mealtimes fun for the whole family. I'd make faces with his food on his plate and encourage him to eat different parts of the face. I gave him gold stars to reward him if he ate well. And if he didn't eat? Well - it was no big deal! I also found that if he could watch cartoons at the dinner table, he'd eat distractedly while laughing and chatting about Scooby Doo. Instead of overwhelming his plate, I only gave Oscar the food I knew he liked (pasta, sausages and fish fingers) and slowly began to add new tastes (vegetables in disguise).

"There's been no quick fix but eventually Oscar has begun to eat more and has been more willing to try new things. Last week he ate broccoli for the first time - a major triumph."

## **FURTHER READING**

### **The Food Commission – April 2000 Report**

Childrens Food Examined – an analysis of 358 products targeted at children  
By Dr Karla Fitzhugh and Dr Tim Lobstein

### **National Diet and Nutrition Survey – April 2000**

Young people aged 4 – 18 years old. Volume 1: Report of the diet and nutrition survey.

*A survey carried out in Great Britain on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Departments of Health by the Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics and Medical Research Council Human Nutrition Research.*