

Food for thought

With childhood obesity on the increase, we ask Prue Leith, Chairwoman of the government's School Food Trust, how parents, teachers and children can combat the problem




Prue Leith: 'What we put in our bodies should be of concern to us'

What is the role of the government's School Food Trust?

 I see our role as influencing children, caterers, parents and teachers. We want to encourage schools to engage with parents. And then try to influence children to get them to cook and get the teachers to talk about food in lessons. We're

encouraging schools that are struggling with introducing healthy food to come to us. We'll put them in touch with schools that have cracked it. A lot of schools worry that the whole dining experience is unpleasant. Children only have 40-minute breaks and sometimes they queue for 25 minutes. They end up with nowhere to sit, get frustrated and end up buying a snack instead.


You've campaigned for years for better school meals, but Jamie Oliver gained the limelight. Why was that?

 It's tremendous he managed to get the public's attention because I tried for 30 years to get the government to do something. Jamie's delighted the School Food Trust has been set up. It was his agitating that got something done about school meals. Some people think he should be part of the School Food Trust but I think he's best outside, where he can tell us when we get it wrong.

But a survey last year found fewer pupils were eating school meals because of his campaign.


 Everyone quotes that survey at me. Fifty nine per cent of a tiny sample of schools said the number of pupils eating school meals had gone down. That's as maybe but it's actually very useful because it allows us to say to school cooks: 'If you have a problem with getting children to eat healthy food, there are many cooks we can put you in touch with who can help.' They should go on encouraging children. We'll be doing our own research later this year.

How can parents get children to eat healthily?


 For many young parents, it's difficult because they weren't taught how to cook. I think this is all

the consequence of a food-ignorant society. What we put in our bodies should be of concern to us and I could get boring about it and say it's the product of a cheap food policy in this country. We demand a jumbo pack of something whereas the French idea would be to get top quality rather than quantity.

How can schools supply top-quality food with the amount of money available to buy ingredients?

 I really feel strongly about this. We believe now that the average school is spending 60p a day per pupil on ingredients, so that's not bad. But I think you need to spend 80p a day because, although with 60p you can give children a healthy diet, it's not very exciting. You're likely to have things like pasta and jacket potatoes with different toppings – that is healthy but it does limit the times you can have roast chicken or baked fish.

If schools spent 80p on ingredients would parents be able to afford this increase?

 Mostly, yes. While admitting that the cost of a school meal – between £1.30 and £2 – is relatively inexpensive for many, it is nonetheless a hefty whack for a three-child family on low income. But if you think that the average pocket money is £8.40 a week, 20p a day more wouldn't be so bad. Around 30 per cent of primary-school children get money every day to buy snacks; this undermines the policy of healthy food. They're not hungry at lunch and you have to be hungry to try new food.

FOOD LABELLING

To find out more the current food-labelling debate, see 'Colour code' on p12 in this issue of *Which?*