

Exclusive: Interview with Marion Nestle

PotreroHillParents.org

May 12, 2006

In advance of Marion Nestle's upcoming Potrero Hill event to discuss her new book, *What To Eat*, PotreroHillParents.org had the opportunity to ask the author and well-known nutritionist some questions about food, health and parenting.

Here's our exclusive interview:

PHP: In your latest book *What to Eat*, you mention that there's not just one single nutrient that will make you healthy. Can you give us a few examples of how we can make sure our kids are eating healthy?

Nestle: Oops. That isn't quite what I meant. One single nutrient alone won't make you healthy. You need enough—but not too much—of all of them. Since there are more than fifty nutrients required for health, you would go crazy trying to keep track of them one at a time. The great thing about food is that you don't have to. Unprocessed foods contain loads of nutrients, although the proportions of single nutrients differ. That's why eating lots of different kinds of foods is a really good idea. If you can encourage your kids to taste and try many different foods, even eating small amounts of them, you really don't need to worry about single nutrients (and if you still have nagging doubts, give them a multivitamin).

PHP: From unhealthy school lunches to being bombarded by television ads for junk food, we recognize how “tempting” it is these days for kids to eat the wrong foods. What advice can you give parents to keep their children on track nutritionally?

Nestle: I see three problems with junk foods. They are heavily advertised to make kids want them, they are highly processed so they are not as nutritious as “real” foods, and they are loaded with calories which today's kids don't need. Worse, the advertising is designed to make kids think they are supposed to eat those foods, and not the foods that you eat. Kids should be eating foods for grownups, just smaller amounts and not heavily salted or sugared. If you don't want your kids eating junk foods, don't have those foods in the house.

PHP: How can parents get involved to create real change in the way schools feed our kids?

Nestle: Start by getting involved. Take a look at what is going on in your kids' schools. If the food scene there horrifies you, get other parents to look. Then have a chat—early and often—with the principal, the PTA, and the school food service director. In schools that have made revolutionary changes, and many have, the key players all are committed to doing something about the problem. Without them on board, it's much more difficult and will take greater effort and more time.

PHP: Here in the San Francisco Bay Area, “organic” is as common a word as the variety of food served. What are some of your thoughts on incorporating organic foods in our diets?

Nestle: I like the idea of feeding kids foods that are free of pesticides, and I am a big supporter of Certified Organic as a first step in growing foods in ways that are healthier for the planet and for people. I also like farm-to-school programs in which local growers agree in advance to supply schools with fresh, locally grown foods. Cost is always a serious issue, but if enough places decide that they want to do this, the costs will go down.

PHP: How much do (and should) government (NOTE: the FDA does labels, not guidelines) guidelines influence what parents feed their kids?

Nestle: If the guidelines made sense and anyone actually knew what they were, they could be an important influence. As it is, they are so fraught with politics that they don't give much real guidance. But I think the “rules” are simple: feed kids lots of different kinds of “real”—meaning minimally processed—foods, be sure to include lots of fruits and vegetables, reserve junk foods (especially sodas and juice drinks) for special occasions and desserts. A lot of problems could be solved if parents understood that sodas, juice drinks, sweetened breakfast cereals, and yogurt treats are candy and desserts in disguise. Should you let your kids eat candy for breakfast? Of course not.

PHP: Leading by example, as the saying goes, to what extent do sensible food choices by parents affect what kids will and will not eat?

Nestle: How about 100%? If you want your kids to eat healthfully, you have to eat healthfully yourself. How's that for a deal?

PHP: Now the question on everyone's mind: What are some of your own food “weaknesses”? Come on, we're all guilty. 😊

Nestle: I don't feel at all guilty about eating junk food or sweets once in awhile or even every day. I just don't make them the core of my diet. I particularly love barbecued potato chips, chocolate-covered ginger, and ice cream and can't think of a single reason why I can't eat them when I want them. For me personally, the big issue is calories and, therefore, the amount of food I eat. If there is one thing I wish everyone could understand, it's that larger portions have more calories and that eating too many calories is what makes you gain weight. When it comes to weight, it's not what you eat that counts—it's how much you eat.

About Marion Nestle:



*Marion Nestle is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, in the department that she chaired from 1988 through 2003. Her degrees include a Ph.D. in molecular biology and an M.P.H. in public health nutrition, both from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on analysis of the scientific, social, cultural, and economic factors that influence the development, implementation, and acceptance of federal dietary guidance policies. She is the author of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (University of California Press, 2002) and *Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology, and Bioterrorism* (University of California Press, 2003), and is co-editor of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Food and Nutrition* (McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2004). Her latest book, *What to Eat* (North Point Press, a Division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is to be published on May 2, 2006.*