

Tracie McMillan's changing the eating habits of America's youth



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NEW YORK

Published: June 11, 2012 4:55 p.m.

Last modified: June 12, 2012 10:05 a.m.

Our nation's childhood obesity problem is really an epidemic: One in three American children are overweight or obese, according to the American Heart Association. We spoke with Tracie McMillan, the author of "The American Way of Eating," about how healthy habits start at home.

How do you change bad eating habits?

I think it's shooting yourself in the foot to talk about bucking up and paying more to eat fresh, local, healthy foods when wages are stagnating and when life has been getting more and more demanding. My grandmother says: "Do you want to be right the whole time or do you want people to listen to you?" Don't change the substance of what you're saying; change the form in which you're saying it. I could say, "You should eat local food." Or, I can say, "This is healthier for you and is there a reason you wouldn't want to eat that way?" It's a more difficult conversation to have because it's engaging people. This idea that we're going to get through to people by criticizing them for the food they choose -- you can be right all you want, but I don't think anyone's going to listen. Just do your thing, share what you're excited about with people, and that makes people open to change.

How can we change the stigma of healthy eating as something that only the wealthy does and can afford to do?

Hamburger Helper is actually more expensive than making it from scratch. Why not set up something in advance that's just as easy, cheaper and better for you? People get so stressed out because of their workload that they don't have time to think about what they're making. Do you fix that by making better Hamburger Helper, or do you empower people to know how to cook well enough to do it on their own? There's such a preponderance of processed food in the marketplace that it outweighs other options. Part of what makes eating healthily feel like it's for elites is that

elites have the money to pay someone else to do things for them. Cooking is the most important key to self-sufficiency. It's important to know how to cook well enough so that you don't have to rely on boxes.

What are some ways or incentives to encourage people with low incomes to choose to shop at farmer's markets versus chain stores?

For low-income folks the farmer's market can be tricky because they're usually once a week during a set period of time. The business model of farmer's markets makes it hard for working-class folks to go because their work schedules tend to be more erratic than professionals with office jobs. That said, there are matching incentive programs for people who use food stamps. Farmers [should consider] doing an item-by-item comparison between supermarket flyers and prices at the market. The general perception is that if the farmer's market is too expensive, it's better to save the hassle and go to the supermarket. What if there's a way to show that the markup is literally five cents a pound at the farmer's market for something that's fresher? That kind of information isn't out there.

What are some key items you suggest to buy direct and fresh that fit into a small budget?

If you change the way that you cook with meat, you can afford to buy fine quality. I often use meat as seasoning. I buy high-quality bacon, because it's a great way to give a better heft to the taste of beans. Also, go to a place where they'll sell the backs and neck of chickens, which are cheap and great for making stock. What people like about meat flavoring is there's a certain heaviness to it. You can cheat that with chicken broth, which will make rice and vegetables taste phenomenal and incredibly filling. And [buy] produce in season. In tomato season you can get insane amounts of them cheap. Squash will keep for a long time if you know how to take care of it. I puree and freeze things -- not everything has to be local or super fresh. Canned tomatoes are excellent out of season. Take a critical eye to your budget and be strategic about what you can afford.

Grow your own

Founded in 2010 by environmentalist Kelly Meyer, the American Heart Association's Teaching Gardens teaches elementary school students the how and why of healthy eating. A 35-week curriculum guides students in the classroom and out. Outdoors, children learn how to plant and maintain a vegetable garden. Parents and school administrators can visit www.heart.org/teachinggardens to learn more before e-mailing teachinggardens@heart.org to begin the application process.

More of the do-it-yourself type? Burpee Home Gardens offers a free, comprehensive "I Can Grow" guide on its website (www.burpeehomegardens.com) with tips for starting and sustaining an edible garden for kids.

Plus, Burpee sponsors an "I Can Grow" contest each year for school or community gardens, with grand prize winners receiving up to 500 seedling plants and \$2,500 in garden supplies and layout help from Burpee experts. Information about the 2013 program will be available this summer.

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