

*A head teacher argues for a more structured approach to diet enquiries*

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# What do you eat?

Two of the articles appearing in the previous issue of *Education and Health* were concerned with diet. As well as being a sensitive area for intervention by teacher or school nurse, it is also one where the "true" facts are often extremely difficult to obtain. How does one compare the amounts in different "helpings", for example? How accurately can anyone recall everything that he or she ate and drank yesterday?

Mrs Broughton is the Head of an Essex comprehensive school, who in her "happier classroom days", as she puts it, used the question sheet printed here. She offers it as an example of a more structured approach to diet analysis, commenting: "pupils who don't like writing might just put 'beefburger' for lunch when in fact they also had a roll, fried onions, chips, tomato sauce, and a piece of gateau!" — Ed.

I was involved in health education as a biology teacher, when one topic in particular seemed difficult, although not controversial, to teach. This was how to judge the value of the pupils' own diets. The problems which arose were:

- Trying to get proper records of all that was eaten;
- Making any sensible estimates of food content from standard reference sources;
- Obtaining factual medical evidence that diets of, say, chips and beefburgers were unbalanced to the point of affecting health.

Children of 14 are at the zenith of their growth and generally able to withstand considerable abuse of the body's systems in the short term without ill-effects. They find arguments about reduced growth, poor teeth, and spotty skin unconvincing. Historical accounts of scurvy or rickets refer only to "the old days". Yet the sophisticated animal feeding experiments which could actually demonstrate the effects of diet on non-humans cannot be done in schools!

### A simple analysis

Therefore, I drew up a simple question sheet, to draw attention to certain key factors, other than that of sufficient energy. This is reproduced here. Then the class discussed the food values in the charts in standard books and drew up a scoring system. A good diet had scores of 2 for protein, 2 for fat, 10 for carbohydrate, and 2 for minerals; 1 for vitamins A and D, 2 for vitamin B, and 1 for C. Any item scored if it was a main source of energy or its food group. If the mass was small, it could be entered as a fraction and aggregated.

A balanced diet scored 20 overall, but the total was unimportant: the pupils had to look for matching in each of the sub-divisions. Over-eating of fats, for example, was quickly obvious if 5 was scored on a day's eating including chips and fried beefburger with onions at lunch-time, butter-cream doughnut, and fried fish and chips in the evening.

This does not pretend to be scientifically based nor comparable even between

WHAT DO YOU EAT ?

There are 3 groups of foods which you need to be able to see on your plate every day.

- Proteins: milk, meat, eggs, fish, cheese, nuts.
- Carbohydrates: bread, potatoes, pasta, sugary things.
- Fats: butter, margarine, oil, lard.

All meals have these in.

Please tick the columns below, to show what you ate yesterday.

<u>BREAKFAST</u>	<u>LUNCH/DINNER</u>	<u>SMALLER MEAL</u>
milk in drink	meat/fish/egg/cheese	protein food
cereal + milk	potato/pasta/pastry	bread/pastry
toast or bread	fresh vegetable/fruit	fruit/vegetable
fat	frozen vegetable/fruit	fried food
egg/bacon etc.	fried food	milky food
fruit/juice	custard/yogurt/cream	cakes/buns
	sweet pudding/cake	

Did you eat at other times?

Please tick if you ate any of these:-

sweets	chocolate	crisps	fruit
savoury snacks	biscuits	sandwiches	
other things (write down what) .....			
.....			

groups. But it was effective in promoting discussion and producing lively criticism of some eating patterns. I also found that the principles were well retained — and even, occasionally, used! In its simplest form, without any further complication than "Are there 2 examples of mainly protein foods — score 2", it could be used with slow-learning pupils.

*The enquiry sheet used by Mrs Broughton to judge the nutritional value, and balance, of her pupils' diets. Each item was "scored" according to its protein, fat, carbohydrate, mineral, and vitamin content.*