

THE **CrossFit** JOURNAL

# CANDY KIDS

Failed by their schools, kids rely on parents and coaches to teach them about proper nutrition.

BY HILARY ACHAUER





Toward the end of our cross-country flight from San Diego, California, to the Northeast, the first-class flight attendant appeared in coach holding a tray of fresh baked cookies.

The sweet, warm smell filled the cabin as she passed over the adults and stopped at every row with kids, carefully handing cookies to all the children and presenting the treats with a smile.

A few minutes later the drink cart rolled down the aisle.

“Orange juice? Apple juice?” the flight attendant asked my kids, ages 7 and 10.

Once we reached our final destination for holidays with family, the treats continued, including after-breakfast lollipops the kids found in the basement, multiple trips to the doughnut shop and sugary Vitaminwater for hydration following a spirited game of driveway basketball.

Each cookie or doughnut was given with love and a sense of celebration. None of the treats on its own was terrible, but day after day the kids exceeded the six-teaspoon added-sugar daily limit recommended by the [World Health Organization](#).

As a health-conscious parent, I had two choices: smile and say nothing or speak up and make everyone feel bad.

I usually picked the first option, knowing our daily healthy eating habits matter more than a few days of holiday excess. But when is it time to choose the second option?

And how do you get through to kids when sugar is available everywhere and they're told eating it is OK?

## The Problem With Sugar

In schools across the United States, kids are taught not to worry about the type of food they eat as long as they balance the sugary drink or cookie with exercise. A recent [Mother Jones article](#) pointed out this curriculum is the product of the [Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation](#), which is sponsored by companies that benefit from kids' eating junk food: PepsiCo, The Hershey Co., Nestlé USA, The Coca-Cola Co., Unilever, The J.M. Smucker Co. and others.

The “energy balance” concept taught to millions of elementary-school-age kids promotes the idea that a healthy lifestyle is created by ensuring calories in equal calories out. The message is not to avoid sugar or junk food but to balance those foods with exercise.



During a recent vacation, the author and her husband were presented with a dilemma: let their kids eat sugar or try to limit treats over the holiday season.

“All foods can fit into a sensible, balanced diet,” reads the final PowerPoint slide in a [downloadable lesson plan](#) aimed at kids in grades 3-5. Earlier in the presentation, another slide asked, “Where does your energy come from?” and answered with six pictures, four featuring juice, raspberries, a hamburger and an ice-cream cone.

On the surface, the message doesn't sound all that bad. Exercise is good, right? And don't most adults talk about burning off a night of indulgence the next day at the gym?

The problem is this concept is not scientifically sound.

In the recent New York Times article [“Rethinking Weight Loss and the Reasons We're 'Always Hungry,’”](#) David Ludwig brushed aside the energy-balance idea and suggested another reason for obesity: “It's the low fat, very high carbohydrate diet that we've been eating for the last 40 years, which raises levels of the hormone insulin and programs fat cells to go into calorie storage overdrive.”

Ludwig is professor of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the author of “Always Hungry.”

The body simply does not process all foods in the same way, and the energy-balance equation is dated and oversimplified.

The body simply does not process all foods in the same way, and [the energy-balance equation is dated and oversimplified](#). For example, it should be clear that consuming 400 calories of refined sugar will have very dramatic effects on your metabolism as compared to the body's response to 400 calories derived from a combination of low-glycemic carbohydrates, protein and fat.

That's the science. Running up against this is a culture that associates sugar with love and good times—especially when it comes to kids. What's a birthday without cake, Halloween without candy, Easter without chocolate or Christmas without candy canes?

It's one thing for an adult to give up sugar, but asking kids to do the same is a tall order, especially if they're told in school that sugar is fine if they exercise.

Before we left for Maine, our family attended our neighborhood holiday parade. In previous years, the kids left the parade with armfuls of candy canes and chocolate, but this time my husband told my kids, “I don't want you taking any of the candy.” The holidays had started to reach peak sugar intake, and we knew they were already way over their sugar allowance for the week.

The parade started, and we stood in the San Diego sunshine, watching local politicians, Boy Scout troops and marching bands roll by. Each float had a volunteer who handed out sweets to the children watching from the sidewalk. When the volunteers came our way, candy canes in hand, our kids backed away and shook their heads with a backward glance at us, checking to make sure we were serious about enforcing the rule.

The constant refusal of treats started to wear on them. My daughter spent the first 15 minutes scowling and looking sadly at the kids on either side of her happily filling their pockets with candy canes. Eventually, once both kids realized we weren't going to change our minds, they relaxed and began waving to the local beauty queens and firefighters.





Most kids love candy, but nutrition education can help them learn to enjoy a few treats while making healthy choices as often as possible.

Once we got home, I thought about how we had handled that situation. In our zeal to protect the kids from sugar overload, we went overboard. We should have let them experience the fun of collecting the candy canes, allowing them to eat one or two before throwing out the rest.

This is the challenge with kids and sugar. It's difficult to know where to draw the line—when to step in and when to step back.

### Practical Solutions

CrossFit Kids flowmasters Todd Widman and Jon Gary spend a lot of time thinking about how to keep kids healthy. They understand the importance of health but also know the importance of balance and moderation.

"It's the same perspective that we have with movement," Gary said. "You can't ask for perfection in movement or diet overnight. You need buy-in from kids and from families and parents in order for this to be maintained for a long time."

Gary, who holds a doctorate in molecular biology, likes to begin with education, letting people know what real food is and how it differs from processed food. The trick, he said, is to resist demonizing—or lauding—specific foods.

"It's just, 'Hey, these are some all-the-time foods, and these are sometime foods, and these are rare foods.' Then it's not a taboo thing. Sometimes if you tell certain children not to do something, that's exactly what they want to do. 'Why is it that I'm not allowed to do that?' That's just a natural thing," Gary said.

Gary said he tries not to be too strict either way.

"When an adult client comes in and says, 'Jon, change me,' that's carte blanche. When a kid comes in, who knows why they are coming in? Maybe their parents made them," he said.

Widman, who has two boys 6 and 9, said he struggles with limiting his kids' sugar. Like Gary, he thinks making too much of nutrition can backfire with kids.

"The conundrum is (nutrition) is so important, so we have to make it like, 'Oh, yeah, it's no big deal.' The second thing, practically, how the hell do you do that? What I recommend, and what CrossFit Kids recommends, is to do your best to surround them with ... whole food (and) real food. Get them involved in the decision-making process of 'which would you like: the apple or the carrot or the broccoli' not 'what do you want to eat?'"

He said the second challenge is education. That involves teaching kids about macronutrients and the difference between whole and processed food.

"We are always going to eat healthful protein—some type of meat—and we are always going to eat vegetables, and we are going to eat fruit, and sometimes we will have french fries and cake. Why? Because the stuff is not good for us, but it's sure tasty, so every now and then it's appropriate," Widman said.

With CrossFit Kids, good eating habits are to be honed over time, just like learning how to deadlift. Before Thanksgiving, Gary incorporated nutrition education into his class of young teens, ages 10 to 15. Gary assigned a macronutrient to each kid and used the groups during skill work.

"There were some woefully inadequate abilities there," Gary said. "When we asked them 'what is fat?' they immediately think 'ham.'"

He said kids don't learn about macronutrients in school, so education at a very basic level is one goal of the CrossFit Kids program.





Kids don't learn about macronutrients in school, so education at a very basic level is one goal of the CrossFit Kids program.

Erin Ferguson, 41, has found a nutrition balance that works for her family. She has three boys aged 2, 6 and 8, and she works part time as a teacher. Her husband, a firefighter paramedic, spends many nights at the fire station. In the Ferguson family, healthy eating is important but not an obsession. The whole family works out at CrossFit 760 in La Costa, California. Ferguson cooks for her family every night, planning the week of meals on her days off, knowing the family will eat dinner together when her husband isn't spending the night at the fire station.

Even though her 6-year-old is a picky eater, Ferguson doesn't cater to his tastes. Sometimes he won't eat what she serves.

"We offer what we offer, and they can have as much or as little of those offerings," Ferguson said. On the nights her husband is at the fire station, she gives the children more traditional kid food, such as chicken nuggets.

After dinner, her kids know not to ask for sugary treats.

"We don't have dessert. It's not a thing in our home. If they are still hungry after a meal, they may have a banana or a yogurt, something like that. But if we are at a birthday party, we definitely don't restrict sugar, but we don't encourage it," Ferguson said.

She and her husband don't dwell on the negative aspects of sugar but talk about why protein and vegetables will help their kids feel good and stay healthy and strong.

"I feel if we restrict something, it makes them want it more. We don't say 'you can't have sugar' but we don't have it in the house," she said.

"We don't stress about it. We know there are going to be ebbs and flows and times where it's around. I don't think we restrict it too much during the holidays. It's part of the holiday season," she said.



Erin Ferguson (right) doesn't worry too much about her kids' sugar consumption over the holidays or at birthday parties, but sweets aren't in the house to tempt her children.

Courtesy of Erin Ferguson

## Sugar Strategies for Teens

The advantage with young kids is that although they are offered a staggering amount of sugar, parents generally have a good amount of control over what they eat. I can tell my elementary-school-age kids not to take candy at a parade, and they are young enough they'll listen.

The same tactic won't work with a 16-year-old.

"It's especially challenging telling teenagers how to eat," Gary said.

"Some things I've tried to do with the teenagers I train is I try to associate how they feel with what they are eating," he said. "They can start to see how important that is. If it's a day where maybe they seem a little more tired than usual, instead of asking, 'What's going on?' I ask, 'What did you have for breakfast?' tying their energy levels with what they eat and maybe suggesting an alternative."

Teenagers also have a variety of ways to ingest sugar, such as in caffeine- and sugar-filled energy drinks—things that aren't typically consumed by younger kids.

"I think (consumption of) sugar-laden drinks is off the charts (among high-school students)," Widman said. "Gatorade, Powerade, whatever-ade, those 'health' drinks—they seriously think this is good for you. 'This is getting my electrolytes up—whatever that means—and so I'm drinking it,'" he said.

"Supplements in general and caffeine in specific are out of control for teens," Widman said. He said most teens carry around energy drinks, along with "pre-workout, post-workout, protein shake this, whatever that stuff is."

Rules and restrictions don't work with teenagers, so Gary said the best way to change behavior is through education and reinforcing good nutrition at home.

"If you say, 'Hey, when you go over to your friend's house, you can't have a Pop-Tart,' that's a recipe for 'hey, I'm going to have a Pop-Tart,'" Gary said. However, if your teen is used to a diet of mostly whole, unsweetened food, the Pop-Tart experience might not be as positive as he or she expected.

"You hope that (a healthy diet) changes their palate. If you don't ever have excessively sweet things, the first time you taste a soda, or a candy bar, you're like, 'Whoa, that is weird,'" Gary said.

## Balance and Vigilance


Food is much more than sustenance. It's deeply tied to our culture, to the way we celebrate and the way we show love. To deny ourselves—or our children—the joy of special treats on holidays and birthdays is to miss out on a delightful part of life.

Unfortunately, sugary foods have moved from occasional treats to everyday fare for many people. While the body can handle "mistake meals" from time to time, the real negative health effects come from a daily soda habit or a steady diet of sweetened, processed food.

While the body can handle "mistake meals" from time to time, the real negative health effects come from a daily soda habit or a steady diet of sweetened, processed food.

It's all too easy for kids to exceed their daily allotment of added sugar even if schools are working to make it somewhat harder for children to get their hands on sodas and other sugary treats.

A gentle touch is helpful when instructing kids, teens and dubious parents about nutrition. Rather than giving a speech about what to eat, Gary said he'll sometimes provide recipes. Once they see how delicious, affordable and satisfying it is to eat a good meal, they want to learn more.



The thing to remember when working with kids and teens on nutrition is that a one-size-fits-all approach does not exist. Some kids might be motivated by athletic performance and some are just there to have fun.

“It’s all about success,” Gary said, and the challenge lies in figuring out how each child or teen personally defines success. Gary also cautions not to expect perfection right away. Just as a flawless squat is not achieved the first week, ideal nutrition habits are not formed right away.

“You have to allow everyone to do it at their own pace, and when you do, the compliance level increases,” Gary said.

In a CrossFit Kids setting, athletes learn how to move, but they also learn that food is the foundation of fitness and the fuel for performance. Once young, fit children understand the value of good nutrition, you might not have to convince them to make good choices. In fact, you might find your kids glaring at you the next time you pop a cookie into your mouth. ■

## About the Author

Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit [hilaryachauer.com](http://hilaryachauer.com).

