

How do you turn today's kids on to healthy eating and exercise habits?...

By Barbara Storper

How do you turn today's kids on to healthy eating and exercise habits? It's quite a challenge, given that:

- the average child sees over 10,000 food commercials per year, with the majority promoting junk foods.
- there are over 300,000 food products sold on supermarket shelves, most of which weren't even around when our grandparents were kids.
- the average child drinks 600 cans of soda per year, the average teen drinks 750. With 10 teaspoons of sugar a pop, that's over 50 pounds of sugar consumed per child each year!
- Less than two percent of the nation's kids are meeting their nutritional requirements.

We all know the statistics – childhood obesity has become the nation's number one health epidemic. According to the CDC, one out of two African American and Hispanic children, and one out of three Caucasian children are expected to develop diabetes if current eating and exercise habits don't improve. What's a parent, teacher, or child to do?

We like to say - FOODPLAY to the rescue! FOODPLAY is a live theater show that tours schools and special events around the country, bringing its cast of colorful characters, amazing feats of juggling, music, magic, and audience participation to help kids take charge of growing up healthy and fit!

But why a live theater show? Back in 1982 as I was getting my Masters in Nutrition, I was asked to give a lecture on nutrition to kids at an inner city school in Brooklyn. A lecture...on nutrition... ..to 400 kids...how boring! I had always



been horrified by the barrage of TV advertisements promoting junk food products to kids. But I thought if advertisers are so successful marketing junk food to kids, why not use those same techniques to promote healthy foods?

Luckily, I had picked up some real career-building skills at University of Michigan, with juggling topping the list! That, plus a host of theater arts, mime, storytelling, and puppetry workshops came together to trigger the idea – what could be more exciting, involving, interactive, and inspiring than live theater?! FOODPLAY was born!

The 400 kids in Brooklyn loved the show, and the NYC Board of Education toured the show throughout the city's schools to rave reviews! For me, having entered the nutrition profession with a personal mission that grew out of more difficult times – helping my mother struggle with cancer for several years, and realizing how much food had to do with one's health as well as the health of the planet – the children's reactions were amazing and motivated me to use the power of live theater to continue spreading the word.

Today, FOODPLAY has reached over three million kids around the country, and studies show it works! According to USDA and CDC-sponsored evaluations, FOODPLAY programs dramatically improve children's eating and exercise habits, and children bring the healthy messages home! But what I love most, is that the lessons are delivered in a spirit of fun and celebration!

We've learned a lot since our first show in Brooklyn! There's nothing like the power of live theater to reach the hearts, minds, and spirits of children. For nutrition education to be effective, it needs to actively involve children, and activate the five senses, and with food, that's not hard to do! Teaching that oranges are a good source of vitamin C does little if you don't help kids discover the juicy, sweet, refreshing taste of a real orange! And as the readers of this newsletter know, kids will enthusiastically take on the role of health advocate – for themselves, their families, their schools, and their communities – if they are empowered with the information and the skills!

Since 1982, we've had the opportunity to create several additional programs designed to address the unique needs of different populations. Along with a live theater performance, schools also receive comprehensive school resource kits to help teachers meet standards, integrate nutrition and health into core subject areas, and extend lessons throughout the year – in class, and at home.

Fresh Adventures! for Urban Youth:

FOODPLAY's Fresh Adventure! and Li'l Red Ridin' Thru Da' Hood are two shows we created in collaboration with Fresh Vision Youth Theater in Philadelphia, and nutritionist Caree Jackson, MS, RD, LD, in Atlanta. Featuring a home-grown cast of local performers, hip-hop music and dance, juggling, and audience participation, these shows celebrate healthy food and fitness choices for families in urban environments.

THIS IS YOUR LIFE! for Middle Schools:

While obesity rates are soaring, eating disorders and harmful dieting practices are being reported among younger and younger children. By fourth grade, two thirds of our nation's girls have gone on some kind of fad diet because they think they are "fat". And up to 20% of today's female high school students and increasing numbers of male students report signs of eating disorders.

We created THIS IS YOUR LIFE!, based on extensive focus group work with teens, thought provoking drama, and humorous improvisation, with sponsorship by the MA Dept. of Public Health and Centers for Disease Control. Bringing to the stage a life-size Barbie doll, fun food skits, improvisation, a game show, and audience participation, the program teaches teens that every body is different and different is a great thing, and that it's important to treat your body right, whatever its size or shape. The performers help students see through the thousands of junk food ads they see each year, and help decipher food labels to identify the most nutritious choices. In the final game show skit, we bring back people in the actors' lives who have influenced them. With new-found knowledge, they get a chance to speak back to these influences, and ultimately take charge of making their lives healthy ones.

- Foodplay's Eight Strategies to Turn Kids on to Healthy Eating**
- **Find out where kids are at, and start from there**
 - **Live it, don't preach it**
 - **Show, don't tell**
 - **Arm kids with the consumer skills needed to make sense of a confusing marketplace**
 - **Make connections relevant to their world**
 - **Engage all the senses in discovery learning**
 - **Make healthy food and active living irresistible**
 - **Have fun**

Tobe Fit – Ace Food Detective for a Healthy Planet:

Presently, I'm working on a one person show, "Tobe Fit, Ace Food Detective," based on our children's book, Janey Junkfood's Fresh Adventure! Complete with "sugar decoders" and "detective logs," Tobe will lead kids on an investigation into the food system, discovering the differences between whole foods and foods with holes, and helping kids become ace food detectives in their own neighborhoods.

Visit www.foodplay.com for fun food and nutrition activities, and to download a free set of "Tickets to Fresh Adventures!" – colorful recipe cards for nutritious and delicious fruit and veggie snacks kids can make on their own or with a little help from grown-ups.

We hope to visit you at your schools to make nutrition come alive!

Barbara Storper, MS, RD, is a national leader in children's nutrition and Founder/Executive Director of FoodPlay Productions, an Emmy Award-winning nutrition theater and media company. Barbara is also a media spokesperson, conference presenter, and author of Janey Junkfood's Fresh Adventure!, a children's book designed to make good eating great fun! She may be contacted at Barbara@foodplay.com. Treat yourself to a sneak preview, follow this link <http://www.foodplay.com/news/home.html#new1>.

