

By Ruth Ostrow

My daughter's babysitter had a recent complaint. My child seemed somewhat "neurotic" about what she ate. Seems the unwary sitter tried to give her a candy bar. My daughter refused, reciting things off the label including fat and sugar content, and explaining the dangers of food colouring.

It's true. My child knew the words "gluten-free" before she could say "Mama", and at 11 would not be out of place at a nutritionists' conference.

The reason is she has two baby-boomer parents who are part of the new world obsession with wellness and anti-ageing. While we're still journalists (translation: we like to "party"), we do put balance back into our lifestyles and diets. In our world, mungbean is not a dirty word.

Which brings me to the point: even with her own desire to eat healthily, each time she sits in front of the TV during the kids' timeslot she gets seduced by ads for fast or junk foods - many now claiming to be "nutritional". "Mummy, can we get McDonald's tonight? It's healthy - they now have these salad thingos and you get a free toy." "Mum, can you buy Coco Pops? They're nutritional. They're enriched with calcium and vitamins - it says so on the TV."

It's called pester power. Advertisers peddle to youngsters, who then nag us into submission. And what wicked manipulation of the facts it is to imply that foods with high fat, salt or sugar content can be made "healthy" by additives when, for instance, a quick scan of popular kiddies' cereals, including Coco Pops, reveals many have more than 30 per cent sugar per 100g. If my daughter can be conned, then how do struggling families with no time for nutritional obsessions cope with the onslaught from their kids?

On Four Corners recently, health minister Tony Abbott said he didn't want to interfere with a free economy by regulating children's ads. We're in the middle of an obesity crisis; one in four children is either obese or overweight - which can lead to heart disease, diabetes and a host of crippling illnesses.

Methinks the government has been interfering a lot recently. No free choice with the morning-after pill, despite its availability in all civilised countries; a distinct contraction of choice in proposed workplace and anti-terrorism legislation. Yet nothing to stop gastronomical hijacking.

Come on, guys, this is a popular one. If you aren't really going to be laissez-faire, then at least interfere to protect our kids.

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