

## Not a Mars bar in sight

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Obesity is big news and big business today. In the UK as many as one third of the population is obese (in parts of the US the figure is two thirds) and the latest information warns of obesity in children becoming an increasingly common problem, with health and self-esteem severely affected. Debates on food labelling, junk food advertising, vending machines in schools, school lunches sponsored by fast food outlets, lack of exercise and so on, suggest that the root causes of this national epidemic may begin to be addressed. In one corner of Brighton, however, there is no need for such debate. The Brighton Steiner School has had a ban on junk food and processed, packaged foods since its inception in 1981.

Children who bring packed lunches must bring wholesome nutritious sandwiches or flasks of soup, along with fruit, vegetable crudités, nuts or seeds. There are no crisps, chocolate, sweets, pre-packaged juices or fizzy drinks, or even pre-packaged cereal bars. School lunches consist of freshly made baguettes, home-made pizza (once a week), baked potatoes or soup. In the kindergartens, a hearty snack is provided mid-morning for the energetic under 7's, a different wholegrain for each day of the week. Youngsters tuck into brown rice with tamari, home-made bread, toasted millet, porridge with honey from the school's own hive, and on Fridays make their own vegetable soup.

All children learn cooking because those who can cook well will have the tools to continue eating well as they develop into adults. In the parent and toddler groups children as young as two will knead dough for their bread rolls into snails or mice or dragons and have the pleasure of eating their efforts later on! Older children demonstrate competence and professionalism helping run busy cafes and restaurants for guests and parents at school events and fundraisers.

Each child at the Brighton Steiner School brings in a cake to celebrate their birthday with their class but teachers ask that chocolate be avoided and low sugar, healthy recipes chosen. Parents and children are made aware on joining the school of the policy on food because it is considered so important. So why the emphasis on natural foods and healthy eating?

Well, the concerns about childhood obesity partly answer that question. Healthy food is a pre-requisite for a healthy life – *and* a healthy outlook; it's no coincidence that the terms 'health' and 'well-being' are so often bracketed together. As part of its wider ethos of the importance of a natural environment for children to thrive academically and grow into balanced adults, the Brighton Steiner School makes a commitment to the nutritional needs of its pupils. And healthier pupils are more likely to perform better and less likely to miss school through illness. Children who are pumped up on the additives and sugar in junk food find it hard to concentrate on learning. What they *are* learning is bad food habits that are likely to stay with them for life. Without a doubt,

some pupils at the Brighton Steiner School will be only too happy to get home and tuck into a chocolate bar! They will all, however, take home an awareness of the importance of nutrition and during school hours they are well-fed and able to focus on school work.