



ABC News

Bye-Bye Worries and -- Hopefully -- Obesity
Program Lets Parents Screen Children's Lunches Digitally
By MICHELLE HIRSCH

Aug. 28, 2006 -- Lisa Jones used to worry about how to get her son to eat healthy food for lunch when he was at school, and how to get her daughter to eat anything at all.

Jones, a mother of two from Vero Beach, Fla., said her 15-year-old son often spent all his lunch money on as many slices of pizza as he could afford, while her 11-year-old daughter would spend hers buying erasers at the school store.

That was before Jones enrolled in a program called Mealpayplus, an online system that allows parents to prepay for their children's school meals and to screen what foods they are eating.

What It's About

Besides being convenient for parents who hate driving lunch money to school when their kids forget it, Mealpayplus addresses a nationwide call for parents to control their children's eating habits more closely.

"I think something has to be done. We cannot carry on with children the way it is going, and programs like these are desperately needed in schools, where kids are left to their own devices," said dietitian and author Maye Musk.

The program was started in 2003 and is beginning to gain momentum in schools across the United States as a tool of both convenience and nutrition education.

At the start of the 2006-07 school year, it will be available in more than 3,000 schools in 32 states across the country.

How It Works

Parents log onto Mealpayplus.com and pay for their child's lunches with a credit card.

They can log on anytime to check the balance or see what their son or daughter has eaten for lunch. The system even sends parents e-mails when their account runs low.

When students arrive at the lunch room, they punch their pins into a machine -- much like an ATM -- before joining the lunch line.

A student's account information appears on the cashier's computer, showing the child's picture and listing any allergies or any foods that

the parents have listed as "prohibited" -- it also displays the available balance.

"There are so many young children who may not even know what foods they are allergic to," Mealpayplus director Tina Bennett said.

"This way, when a child allergic to apples grabs a cookie made with apple sauce, the cashier can take it from their lunch tray before that child develops hives."

A Call for Change: But Is It the Right One?

With 155 million school-age children considered obese, it's no wonder parents and schools are worried about children's diets.

"There's a misconception that schools don't offer nutritious choices, which couldn't be farther from the truth. It's more that children just don't make them," Bennett said.

Using programs like Mealpayplus, along with health education both in school and at home, is crucial in preventing this generation of children from having shorter life expectancies than their parents, Bennett added.

"If parents help children change their eating habits, hopefully, many of these problems we are seeing today in kids won't follow them into adulthood," Musk said.

While these programs might benefit children's health, according to some psychologists, if they are not implemented carefully, they could damage children's self-esteem.

Imposing choices on children without first explaining why it is being done could wind up alarming them, said Ronnie M. Hirsh, a New York City-based marriage and family therapist.

"I don't think it's entirely appropriate for cashiers in schools to be swiping food off a child's plate in front of other children. That will make children feel shame and embarrassment -- more than a genuine understanding of what good nutrition is," Hirsh said.

"I can see what this program is aiming at, but the execution seems lacking."

Hirsh added that teaching good nutrition in the home was the best way to curb dangerous eating habits before they got out of hand.

But some parents say they believe this program has been a stepping stone to opening a dialogue with their children about nutrition.

Testimonials

Lisa Jones now uses the program with her kids who, she reports, are eating nutritious lunches -- including at least one vegetable -- every day.

Her son, Darin, has cut back on eating junk food by learning how to budget his money for the week, she said.

"It's opened the dialogue about proper nutrition, and lets me physically see what foods they are choosing so we can talk about it later. Not to mention, it's so convenient," Jones said. "And now my daughter can't spend her lunch money at the school store."

Gena Gillmore, a mother of three from Forth Worth, Texas, said the program was more a staple to keep her kids from going hungry than to limit them.

"My son, who is notorious for forgetting lunch money, does it all the time. Usually, I would drop everything and run to school with money, but now I can just sign into my account, and the money processes on the account in 15 minutes," Gillmore said.

The program is not foolproof, though.

"You're always gonna have some kids who can eat around anything it seems, and if that's what they want, they will find a way," Bennett said.

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