

The Herald

Why bribery may be a fat lot of good

Generally speaking, jurisprudence isn't part of the school curriculum, but responses to the problem of obesity in young people appear to provide something of a primer for why people obey rules. In Scotland the implied motivation is reward. Just as law-abiders get to keep their liberty, pupils who choose healthy over unhealthy food in Glasgow school canteens receive points which they can redeem at the end of term for book tokens, cinema tickets, iPods and Xbox games and consoles. As reported in The Herald yesterday, the scheme has attracted interest from as far afield as New Zealand, Canada and Japan since its launch a few weeks ago.

In the state of Georgia, US, schoolchildren opt for healthy food because they know they're under surveillance. Their purchases in the canteen can be monitored online through Mealpay.com, which was initially set up as a prepayment system to allow parents to top-up their children's lunch account and then deducted as appropriate at the school till. However, the Mealpay.com manufacturer, Horizon Software, was requested to develop online meal monitoring after parents began to wonder where their money was going, and on what. So it is that a pupil's mother or father knows about that chocolate bar concealed about their son's or daughter's person without having to go anywhere near the school. In Connecticut, good-old prohibition has been brought in, so disobedience is not even an option. The state senate ruled that junk food be banned in schools from May 26. The bill, which was debated for longer than recent senate discussions about the death penalty and same-sex marriages, also requires that pupils aged under 11 take an extra 20 minutes exercise in addition to their normal PE timetable.

These three very different approaches have a few things in common. For a start, each reflects the "by any means necessary" attitude that has emerged since the extent of the obesity problem began to register in the minds of policy-makers. This is why we have awful, results-based fat camps for kids, which remove them from the circumstances in which they put on weight and make them lose it in a hermetically-sealed environment before spitting them back out again.

The phenomenon of junk foods pretending to be healthy is also a product of this way of thinking. Whereas food used to be just "good" and "processed rubbish", there has emerged an ambiguous third category that appears to be benefiting most from the knee-jerk reaction to children's diets, not least that brown bread craftily masquerading as white and nutritionless dross fortified with vitamins and fibre. It's the halfway point between luminous cheese slices and natural yoghurt; not ideal but the best a busy parent can be expected to do. Anyway, the children will think they're still eating what they want. That is, junk food.

Yet we could be doing better than this. There's a fourth, perhaps idealistic, legal theory that people obey rules because they understand them and agree with them. In this way, buying an apple instead of chocolate means "I want this because it's good for me" and not "I want an iPod" (Scotland), "I'll get a row otherwise" (Georgia) or "there isn't a junk food alternative" (Connecticut).

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all – requires an education so that an informed choice may be made. Ironically, the school kids who are part of the various existing healthy-eating plans aren't getting one. There's no motivation to learn; only to conform and benefit from this conformity.

While it's never wise to give children a choice about what they eat before they understand the basics – what's in it, how it's made, whether it's nutritious – once they're old enough to make informed choices, it's important that they are allowed to do so. It's also important that this distinction about choice is made. The blanket ban on junk foods in Connecticut schools was vehemently opposed by junk-food manufacturers (though I believe they call themselves corporate lobbyists) who said that the bill was too intrusive and compromised consumer choice. Choice is the best argument the lobby has and it's an effective one these days.

Upon leaving the school environment, then, with its special regulations on choice, what will the reward be for choosing a tub of salad instead of a smoked sausage supper? Good health, of course, but since that hasn't been the basis for their decisions in the past, why should it suddenly change once the incentive has been removed? Likewise, why shouldn't Connecticut graduates celebrate their freedom to choose by tucking into some Cheetos, Tostitos and Nutter Butter Cookies (popular in Connecticut, apparently)?

If young people don't learn why they're doing something – the real reason, that is – then there's no reason why they'll continue to do it once the pressure is off. Yes, the Scottish scheme has all the signs of a successful policy – decisive, drastic, influential – but it isn't necessarily substantial. Just like the white "brown" bread.

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