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SWEETS

Written by Emily Hourican

In our own funny way, we are well on top of the 'evils of alcohol' in this country. We may still drink it to excess, but we are at least aware that this is the case. We haven't done much about reducing its hold over us yet, but we're watching the situation, debating it, even hesitantly proposing alternatives. We get that it's a problem.

Which is good. Because there's a new enemy in our midst that needs all our attention. What alcohol is to grown-up events – depressingly inevitable – sweets are to children's. Go to almost anything aimed at the under-12s, and you will find quite stunning levels of refined sugar doing the rounds.

Frankly, it's all very 1970s. I am amazed that in the era of single-estate, 70 percent cocoa chocolate and agave syrup, our kids are still regularly to be seen clutching noxious bags of E numbers, flavouring, colouring and lethal sweeteners.

Whether its Halloween, First Holy Communion or community sports days, someone always seems to celebrate by doling out a load of sweets, technically known round our house as a 'bag-o-crap'. This bag will usually contain a packet of crisps, a can of Coke or 'juice drink', a chocolate bar and a packet of jellies. For one child!

The appearance of this bag-o-crap invariably ruins the day for me. I twitch in horror as I watch my children polish off a month's-supply of refined sugar in one go. But what to do? Create a scene? Take it off them? Or grin and bear it?

Having been brought up by a mother who never walked away from confrontation over sweets, who would ring birthday parties in advance to tell the parents that I would be coming with my own sandwiches (wholemeal bread and huge slabs of organic cheddar. Sigh), and that I could have a slice of birthday cake, and nothing else, I long ago resolved to try and be more relaxed about it all. Even though, basically, I share her views that sugar is The Enemy. And so, I have, for a long time, chosen the path of least resistance.

This involves me playing the eccentric as I try and wrestle some of their loot off my children – doing the whole ‘oh I’m just a bit nuts about this so indulge me...’ thing, in order not to seem judgemental. And truly, I’m not judgemental. The vested interests in this matter (Big Food, basically) are far smarter than all of us combined, it’s no wonder they have managed to prosper. However, the matter has now become so serious that I think it’s time to be bloody, bold and resolute, and stop pretending that I am indulging some kind of personal foible in the matter of sugar. I’m not. The stuff is pure poison.

Ireland has an obesity crisis. A diabetes crisis. A heart disease crisis. In the UK, hospital scanning machines are no longer big enough and morbidly obese patients are having to go to the zoo, where they are scanned on machines normally used for elephants and zebras. Which sounds funny, but actually isn’t. We are, on average, all of us, three stone heavier than we were in the mid-60s. We are facing into a future where our health service, already groaning, has simply no hope of coping with what’s coming at it. So enough of pretending that this is just a personal quirk of mine, like hating red, or **Eastenders**.

For a while, there were a variety of obfuscating-type debates – the one about screen-induced inactivity in kids being the main culprit (in fact, a UK study showed recently that kids do just as much running around as they ever did). There was the one about family mealtimes, and how everything would be solved if we could just sit around a table together every day. Now though the dust has cleared. Or settled. Or whatever dust does. The problem is one of quantity and quality rather than any lifestyle stuff. It’s simply the amount of sugar, in particular refined glucose-fructose syrup, in our diets. And it’s a double-whammy – not only is it bad for you, but it also impels you to eat more of it. The body’s reaction to it is a sugar-high, seemingly just as addictive as any other type of high. Once you’re finished, you crave more. And more. And then, bingo! You’re wildly overweight and unhealthy.

I’m not the only one who knows this stuff, obviously. And I can’t be the only parent who twitches in horror as cans of Coke are cracked open. A time is coming when we will look on refined sugar as we currently view cigarettes – something rather *déclassé*, to be consumed guiltily if at all. And roll on that day. In the meantime, we need to challenge the assumption that kids and sugar are a natural fit, like dogs and aniseed. And if we all speak out, none of us will look like crazy fun-hating extremists.

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