

Cruel Kindness

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A CRUEL KINDNESS
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*On the right in blue, Ronnie Brown, age 10½, nearly 9 stone. On the left, with the ball, Jimmy Grant, same age, much the same weight.
In front, Valerie Smith, age 11, 7.12 stone.*

Fatness begins at home. Mrs Brown, well-meaning and the soul of kindness, has made what she'd call "a good filling meal" for her family. It's filling, but it is good for them?

"Go on, take it.
– Alright, Mum.
– Have another cuppa, Dad, you're fagged out.
– I am."

Mr Brown, also very much overweight. Works at a desk, takes no exercise, poor expectation of life.

"Thanks, dove. How about yourself?
– I'll just fill up the pot."

*With his sweet tooth, pity he hasn't heard of things like saccharin.
Even walking makes her puff, and he is breathless all the time.*

"You naughty little girl. Oh, never mind. Mummy didn't mean it. Kiss you better. Here, you have a nice sweetie. Like that? Alright now?"

*If only Mrs Brown knew more about food.
There are three main kinds of food. Protein, carbohydrate and fat. You need the right amount of all three for good health. Protein for growth and to replace worn-out tissues.
Carbohydrate for energy. Fat for warmth. And it's a further source of energy. You need also small quantities of those vitamins we hear so much about today. But you can get all you need from any well-balanced meal which includes fresh fruit and vegetables. Mrs Brown thinks that fatness runs in families and can't be helped. As a matter of fact, there is some truth in this as it's been found that with one fat parent, half the children tend to be overweight. And with both parents fat, nearly all the children are. There's all the more reason for Mrs Brown not to make things worse by stuffing her family with a stodgy meal like this.*

The trouble often starts as a baby. And food is our joy and mother's arms our refuge. So, we identify eating with pleasure and security, to our cost later on. Most mothers want to do all they can for their babies. And a weekly gain in weight seems proof of success. Though a plump one doesn't thrive any better than a lean one.

A nervy mother may try to show affection through food. She may try to force it to show her love. Some mothers add an extra spoonful or two of sugar. Just to make sure. But it's horribly easy to give too much carbohydrate in the feed. Lollies are often used to keep babies quiet. Mothers in a hurry may cut down babies' exercise. And trouble starts.

Poor lonely Valerie comes from a broken home. She has dragged behind the others slowly back from school because she is never really happy in the house with her mother. She dearly loved her vain, handsome father. When he left home for good, she began eating chocolate to console herself. Now she can hardly leave the stuff alone.

“Your tea's waiting, Valerie. And mind you wash up, I'm going out.

– When will you be home, Mum?

– I don't know. Look at you! Growing out of your clothes again. Oh, for Pete's sake, stop eating chocolate!”

Without help, she'll be handicapped for life. Like other fat girls, she'll have to buy outsize dresses. She'll be left on her own at dances. She'll be too embarrassed to undress at the swimming-pool and will go into a fat, breathless woman like Mrs Brown. All this should have been tackled earlier.

Jimmy Grant is young enough. He enjoys the food his mother gives him, but she is fat as well, though Mr Grant and the younger boy are slim.

“Tom, eat it up!

– Can't.

– If you don't eat, you'll never grow big and strong like our Jimmy. Go along, eat it up. Wasting good food.

– Oh, sorry, Mum, I forgot.

– Now, what's that then?

– The school doctor says Jimmy's putting on too much weight, and I'm to take him to be examined. He's just well-built, that's all!

– They're right, love. He is fat.

– They've made an appointment for us. I haven't the time.

– The doctor said so love, so you better go.”

As you may have guessed, Jimmy became one of my patients. I noted his height and took his weight. Then, with callipers, I measured the layer of fat under his skin. I found he was fully 30% overweight, much too heavy.

“There's nothing wrong, is there doctor?

– He's much too fat, and he'll damage his health if he gets any fatter.

– Could it be his glands?

– Making him fat?

– Yes.

– No, that's hardly ever the cause, and it certainly isn't in this case. He's a perfectly normal boy, but you know, he eats too much for his particular needs. He'll have to have a diet.

- Isn't it just puppy fat, doctor?
- No, that's not it.
- What is it, then?
- Unless your boy stops overeating and takes more exercise, he'll grow into a fat man who carries a lot of extra weight around with him wherever he goes. That puts a strain on his heart and lungs, and he may not live as long as he should.
- Couldn't you give him tablets, doctor?
- Their effects would only be temporary. No, it'll have to be a diet, I'm afraid.
- My husband eats everything I give him. How can he keep so slim? I wish I could.
- He must be one of the lucky ones whose appetite and energy are naturally balanced. “

Food which isn't used for energy or growth is turned into body fat and banked on the chest, tummy or thighs. It's much easier for you to see that your child doesn't get fat than for him to get slim when he's grown up.

“It sounds simple, but really, it's quite difficult. You'll all have to help Jimmy as much as you can.

- What are calories, doctor?
- They're units of energy in food terms. The body's fuel. Now, the right way to cut them down is by reducing the amount he eats, particularly the starches and sugars, the carbohydrate in his food. You see, he needs the protein for growth and no snacks or ice lollies or chips in between meals, hey Jimmy?
- Yes, Doctor.
- I know that dieting at home is difficult. But if it doesn't work, we have to take the patient into hospital for treatment. Do your best for Jimmy's sake. You can give him meat, fish, eggs, vegetables, lettuce, they do you all good.”

I gave Mrs Grant the detailed diet sheet and told her that I'd see Jimmy in three weeks' time. But meanwhile, she was to get him weighed each week, and it would be no bad thing for her to do the same. She said she wished she'd known about these things years ago.

Sometimes, you can get children competing to lose weight. So, I was particularly pleased when Ronnie Brown, munching crisps as usual, passed Jimmy on his way in to see me. The others went happily home where Mrs Grant started Jimmy off on his diet right away. She stopped him taking too much sugar and gave everyone some fish, green stuff and fresh fruit. I wish all parents were as cooperative. All too often, they won't try. Mrs Brown even attempted to discourage Mrs Grant when she invited her to tea.

“I couldn't be bothered, dear. I told the doctor straight. We are fat people, that's all there is to it. Dad and I like to see the children enjoying their food.”

In spite of Mrs Brown, Mrs Grant worked wonders with Jimmy. And 3 weeks later, he'd begun to lose weight and gain self-confidence.

“Well done, Jimmy. If you keep on like this, you'll be winning all the races at the next school sports.”

“Go!”

“To cure a fat child is not a simple matter. There are three people involved: there’s the child, the doctor, and above all, there’s you. Mrs Grant helped. Mrs Brown didn’t. Make no mistake about it, it’s overfeeding that makes a child fat. Prevention is relatively simple. It’s a cruel kindness to let your children eat too much.”

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