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The Independent & Free Press is published every Wednesday and Friday at 280 Guelph St., Unit 29, Georgetown Ont., L7G 4B1. It is one of the newspapers published by Metroland Printing, Publishing & Distributing Ltd.

Halton Hills Parenting Magazine is published in conjunction with Barbara Burrows Parenting in May, June, August, October, November and April.

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Where appropriate, professional advice should be sought.

F E A T U R E

The obesity epidemic

by Gabor Mate M.D.

Dr. Mate is a physician and psychotherapist in private practice in Vancouver B.C. His best-selling book "Scattered Minds: A New Look At The Origins and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder!" is published by Vintage Canada.

We hear much in the media today about obesity - in adults as well as children. The prescription is good nutrition, exercise and an all round healthy life style. The most important factor seems to be over-looked.

Overeating, junk food consumption and sedentary living among our children are not root causes, only surface symptoms, the behavioral manifestations of deeper psychological and social malaise.

How does eating, an activity essential for sustaining life, become distorted, undermining many people's health even to the point of shortening survival?

In human development the ingestion of food has significance far beyond its obvious nutritive role. Following birth the mother's nipple replaces the umbilical cord as the source for nutrients to the infant, and is also the point of continued physical contact between mother and child. Proximity to the parental body meets emotional attachment needs that are as basic to the child as the need for physical sustenance. The healthy development of brain circuits and the psychological growth of the individual may be impaired if the child's attachment needs are frustrated. Babies fed but never held are at risk of dying.

When infants are anxious or upset, a human or a plastic nipple is offered — in other words, a relationship with either a nurturing object or something which closely resembles it. Being nourished emotionally and being fed or soothed orally become closely associated in the mind. Emotional deprivation will trigger a desire to eat as surely as the withholding of food. Except in rare cases of physical disease, the more obese a person, the more emotionally starved they have been at some crucial period in their life. The obesity epidemic is a sign of emotional frustration and anxiety on a societal scale.

"Anxiety is an attachment alarm," says Gordon Neufeld, a Vancouver developmental psychologist. Its role in the survival of infant and child is to signal when our attachment relationships, which we are absolutely dependent on, are threatened. If we cannot bear to feel that anxiety, or feel powerless to deal with its causes, we may turn to the temporarily



soothing activity of eating. "It is natural for children to turn to food when they feel stressed and emotionally alone," says Dr. Neufeld. "Stuffing oneself is an attempt to fill an attachment void." As all activities which soothe without satiating the underlying need, eating can become compulsive and even addictive.

Invariably, adults who eat too much not only suffered emotional loss in the past, they are psychically undernourished in the present. One can observe a woman leaving an unsatisfactory relationship, lose weight and gain confidence, only to become heavy again after rejoining her partner: the loss in

emotional energy expended is compensated for in calories ingested. Many people who successfully quit smoking will begin to overeat, their craving for oral soothing no longer eased by their cigarette.

The obesity epidemic demonstrates a psychological and spiritual emptiness at the core of what has been proudly called the consumer society. The erosion of stable communities and neighbourhoods under pressures generated by faceless and anonymous market forces, the dissolution of ties of village and extended family, the stress on parents having to rear children amid increasing insecurity all wreak havoc on relationships and undermine our

sense of connection with others. We feel powerless, we become passive. We lead harried lives, we long for escape.

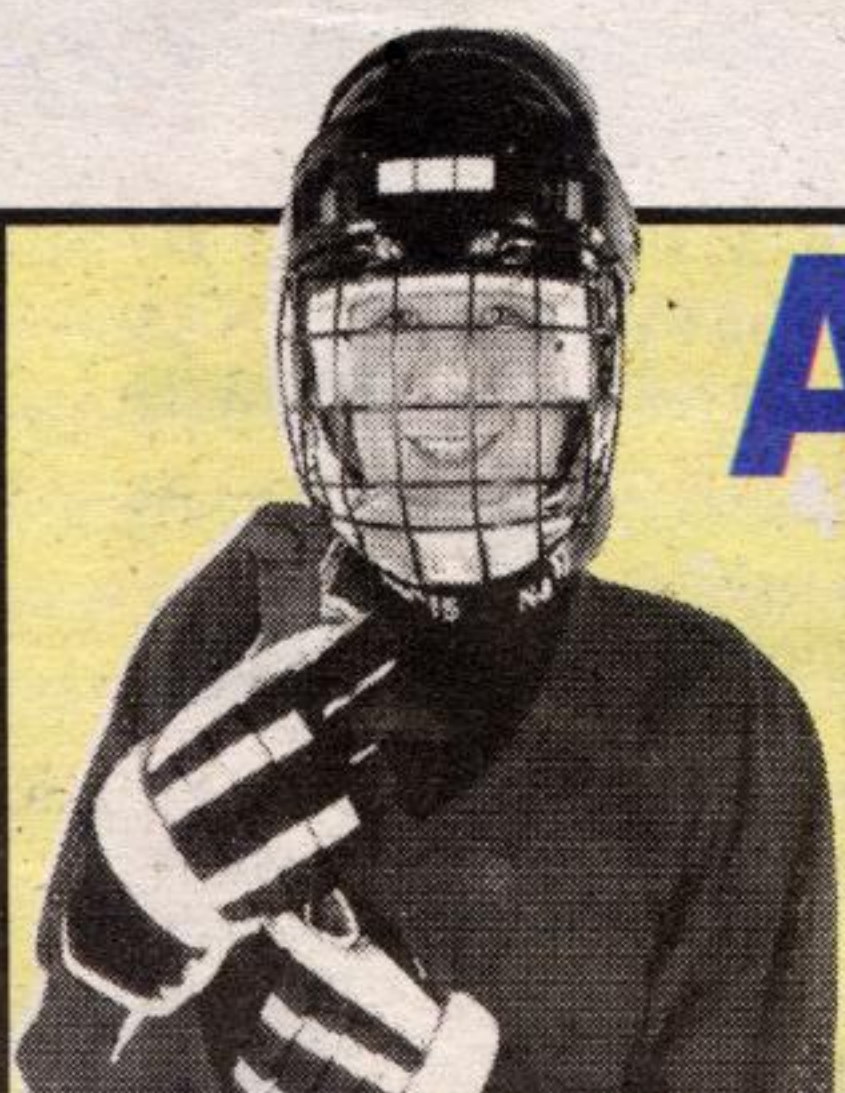
If children today are at greater risk for obesity than in previous generations, it is not simply because they are less physically active due to the availability of sedentary involvements such as television or computers. It is also because there has never before been a generation as deprived of adult contact. No

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less than food, television and computers become substitutes for real contact. Children with a strong sense of themselves, deriving from a strong and emotionally nourishing relationship with adults, do not

need to soothe themselves by passively taking in either food or entertainment.

It is useless, therefore, to try to control children's eating habits by disciplinary measures, by cajoling, by criticism, by rewards or punishments. We need to recognize our children's passivity and overeating as symptoms, and we need to satiate the need that underlies them. That means working on a stable, unconditionally loving, and emotionally nourishing relationship—something all parents want to give our children, but which many of us may be too stressed or busy to really provide.



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