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SUGAR BUZZ

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OUTPOST EXCHANGE

Ivan Gikling knew something was wrong with him, but he didn't know what. The 16-year-old was often depressed and sad. He suffered from severe acne, which blew his self-image. Life felt unbearable.

Then one day a friend's mother told him about a book that solved the mystery for him. Gikling learned he was addicted to a powerful substance that was ravaging him physically and emotionally and ruining his life. It took him months to withdraw from it. Two years later, he's clean, and a very happy, self-confident senior at Shorewood High School in Shorewood, Wis.

Although he calls it a drug, Gikling's former substance of choice is not illegal. He sees his schoolmates openly getting their fix and enjoying a buzz from it every day. In fact, the school and many parents are the kids' connection to the stuff and most students are just copying the habit of their teachers or parents. Have you guessed what this dangerous matter is? Yes, it's sugar.

"People should be aware that sugar is very addicting," Gikling shared in a telephone interview. "When people don't believe me, I challenge them—try quitting for two weeks. I'm not just talking about ice cream and cake. There's sugar in pizza crust, cigarettes, everything! There are so many drugs out there that no one talks to you about—sugar and caffeine" in particular, he points out.

Gikling admits he's become an anti-sugar zealot, sharing his story with anyone who will listen. But it's because he feels so markedly better than he did before and he wants others to feel good, too. "I remember the depression. It was terrible. I kind of felt like dying. Then you quit and notice those feelings go away and feel normal again and realize what kind of evil it was." He can't help notice what others eat and drink. "I see my friends and what they put in their bodies and I think it's too bad. When I see people eating sugar, I think it's sad. You're hooked at the cradle and it never enters people's brains that it's harmful because there are no taboos around sugar," he said.

One of the biggest offenders for teens is sugar in soda. A couple of cans pack 20-24 teaspoons of the stuff. Yet schools such as Shorewood High make the drink readily accessible by having a soda machine in the lunchroom. Gikling reports that candy consumption is rampant.

Gikling has research and experts that back up his experience. "Refined sugar, in excess, can generate anxiety and depressive symptoms. Simple sugars are quickly released into the bloodstream," Carolyn Dean, M.D., N.D., wrote in a January/February 2001 issue of *Natural Health*. "To handle this 'sugar rush,' the pancreas often over-produces insulin, a hormone that helps transport glucose into the cells. As a result, sugar levels may plunge to a low. Low blood sugar is characterized by anxiety, jitters, difficulty concentrating and depression."

“Like opium, morphine and heroine, sugar is an addictive, destructive drug, yet Americans consume it daily in everything from cigarettes to bread,” writes author William Dufty in his 1975 book Sugar Blues, which is the book Gikling credits with changing his life. Other books such as Sugar Busters carry the same message: sugar is destructive.

But if sugar’s so bad, why aren’t more folks, especially parents, up in arms about it? It turns out, when it comes to opinions on the sweet stuff, there are two camps: those who believe sugar is nearly as ruinous as street drugs and those who believe that the first camp’s concerns are overblown; that sugar is relatively harmless. Then there are a whole lot of people who have no thoughts whatsoever on the subject and are content to enjoy their sweet bliss. Determining who’s right is as difficult as trying to pull a Jolly Rancher candy out of your molar.

Sugar Buzz

Ask most mothers of young children what happens when their kids eat a bunch of sugar and they roll their eyes. “Sugar buzz.” It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to measure the level of hyperactivity at the average birthday party. Yet interestingly, and perhaps shocking to the mothers of the party-going children who are madly running around in circles, screaming, laughing and inevitably at some point bursting into tears, there are no studies that confirm a link between sugar and hyperactivity in children.

At least 23 scientific studies have evaluated the effect of sugar on children’s behavior under controlled circumstances and none have found evidence that sugar has any impact on their behavior or cognitive performance. Remind me to call a sugar scientist to take my kids to the next birthday celebration.

It turns out there might be a snag in the studies that say there’s no connection to hyperactivity. In a December 2002 article posted on Healthwell.com, Melvyn R. Werbach, M.D. states, “...the conclusion that sugar does not affect hyperactivity was based only on studies of sucrose. Not only is sucrose the least common of the sugars usually added to the diet, it is made from either sugar cane or sugar beets. Therefore, most of the studies failed to examine the effect of sugar from a single source.” He suggests that if you believe sugar is causing hyperactivity in your child to feel free to minimize the substance, regardless of what the studies state.

Actually, no one is saying that that entire party scene is just a figment of the imagination. Perhaps the operative words in the studies are “controlled circumstances.” In an attempt to reconcile the very real over-activity with the scientific evidence, other contributing factors are scrutinized as possible culprits. One theory is that kids are in fact reacting to other substances in the goodies, such as caffeine. Some children actually may be sensitive to the *source* of the sugar: corn, sugar cane or sugar beets. Then there are the “special occasion” and “parental expectations” hypotheses: that something like a party takes kids out of their usual routine and that kids get geared up for an event (as do the parents) and one or the other or both leads a child to over-excitement.

One also has to look at what else is—or, more importantly, what is *not*—being eaten along with the sugar-laden foods. The combination of sugar and starch, in the absence of any substantial protein,

can be a one-two punch. (This combination is found, for example, in sweetened breakfast cereals). Studies conducted at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C. found that this food scenario increased deviant behavior not only in children who were classified as hyperactive, but also in normal children. Yet the same researchers found that sugar eaten along with a balanced meal actually *improved* classroom performance in normal children, by speeding reaction time, decreasing errors and reducing activity levels.

Suzan Lizauskas of Advanced Health Services in Milwaukee is a specialized kinesiology practitioner who focuses on the body's neural sequence, which can be thrown off by all kinds of factors, including nutritional imbalances. Her clients are often children, many with learning disabilities, behavioral problems and ADD/ADHD. She believes too much sugar definitely has a negative effect on kids and does affect hyperactivity.

Sugar compromises the immune system by reducing the white blood cell count by 92% for four hours after consumption. That's why kids get sick after Halloween or that birthday party. Sugar also creates an acidic condition in the body, which can manifest in aggressiveness, crankiness, or "an attitude." "Children follow their body; whatever it's going through, they tend to follow," Lizauskas said. "The insane thing about being over-acidic is that you crave your imbalance—such as sweets, cheese or milk. When the body is in an over-acidic situation it can't use nutrients, it can't break them down." She advises a tonic of water with fresh-squeezed lemon or an apple without the peel to help regain the Ph balance when a child has overindulged in sweets. It's all about balance, according to Lizauskas. "If a parent can't understand why a child is behaving the way they are, they need to turn to the body and look for imbalances."

In fact, she even advocates for some sugar in a child's diet. "Kids actually need *all* the tastes to balance out the brain. But they need them in moderation," she said.

Andrew Weil, M.D., integrative medicine pioneer and guru of healthy living, is an "everything in moderation" man and belongs to the "what's-all-the-fuss-about-sugar" camp. In his book, [Eating Well for Optimum Health](#) he writes, "I have long been fascinated with the anti-sugar stance of many health food enthusiasts. I have always suspected that part of the reason sugar gets a bad name is just because it is a major source of dietary pleasure. We like sweets; therefore, they must be bad for us." Although he's not advocating for candy, he is also, perhaps surprisingly, not swearing off sugar.

Sugar and Disease

Even though we can't (scientifically) play the "sugar makes your hyper" card, it *has* been scientifically linked to tooth decay, so we parents can still hold that one over the kids when they beg for candy. And the effects of sweets on children actually go beyond a few rotten teeth; there are lots of other diseases that have a link to the substance. Type II diabetes, the so-called "adult onset" diabetes, is at an all-time high *in children*. Heart disease is showing up in kids. That our kids are more overweight than ever has become a hackneyed news story. What's up with all of that?

The refined sugar found in table sugar, soda, Kool-Aid and candy has calories, but no beneficial nutrients like protein, vitamins or minerals. Although these “empty calories” provide a spurt of energy, they don’t provide important nutrients for growing bodies. The spurt is also often followed by a crash, which leaves the child cranky and craving more sugar to bring them back up. Likewise, if kids fill-up on sugar-laden foods and juices before meals, they’re not hungry at mealtime and miss out on nutrient-rich fruits, vegetables and dairy products.

Nutrition experts estimate that American kids get almost half their calories from added sugar and fat. These excess calories, along with the inactivity boom, are major contributors to childhood obesity. One of the biggest sources of sugar in kids’ diets is soda and juice. Simply cutting back on these drinks could have a major impact on calories consumed.

Sugar is in part a culprit for some of the health problems many kids are facing, but it’s not the only factor and simply eliminating it is not the only solution. Although it worked for Ivan Gikling, each person is different and their tolerance for sugar, as well as their sensitivities to other substances, make it difficult to make blanket statements about how to address the sugar issue.

For one, sugar is more pervasive than most of us probably realize, taking many forms in foods. “From a chemical standpoint, you can’t eliminate sugar from your diet. Vegetables are carbohydrates that eventually convert to a type of sugar,” states Larry Johansen, M.S., of Proactive Healthcare Solutions in Menomonee Falls.

The whole carbohydrate issue is another taffy pull of a debate and there's as much confusion about carbs as there is about sugar. What most people don’t realize, Johansen points out, is that carbohydrates are made up of sugars, starches and fiber. When you’re reading a food label, subtract the grams of fiber from the total carbohydrate number and the result is really the total amount of sugar you are getting from the food. That’s because starch converts to sugar. “Starches and juices are as significant [a detriment to people’s health] and maybe even more so than candy,” he said.

Huh? What Johansen is getting at is something called the Glycemic Index. It’s a factor that Andrew Weil talks a lot about and so does Barry Sears, Ph.D., the author of *The Zone* books. Weil writes, “For years dieticians have taught people to distinguish between simple carbohydrates (sugars) and complex carbohydrates (starches) and to moderate consumption of the former while increasing intake of the latter. Physicians often pass this information on to patients, but it turns out to be a meaningless distinction and bad advice. What counts...is how fast a particular carbohydrate food turns into glucose and raises the levels of blood sugar, a characteristic expressed numerically as the glycemic index (GI).”

The trick to avoiding a sugar buzz is to slow down the rate of entry of the glucose into the bloodstream. “The higher the GI, the faster is the rate of increase of glucose in the blood, the greater the insulin response and the greater the potential to expose the body to both the toxic effects of high blood sugar and the harmful effects of insulin,” Weil writes. For instance, chronic elevated insulin levels precede the development of Type II diabetes.

The point is, you need to look at how much total sugar is getting into the blood stream when you are meal planning for your kids (and yourself, for that matter). An example of a less-than-desirable snack would be a glass of apple juice and a bagel. Think back to the Duke University research above. There needs to be some protein in the snack to balance things out and slow down the rate at which the sugar enters into the blood. A better snack from a GI standpoint would be an apple and a piece of string cheese with a glass of water.

The bottom line on all this: both sides of the sugar debate have valid points. There's certainly not anyone advocating for *more* sugar in kid's diets. The issue is over *how much* should be in it. The truth is, probably every kid in America could stand to cut out some empty sugar calories in their diet and replace them with nutrient-rich foods. Some may need it more than others, depending on their current habits. However, "everything in moderation" also has its merits. One article found while researching told the story of the 4-year-old child whose mother staunchly opposed sugar. He was found at the neighbor's house with his fingers literally in the sugar bowl. The best legacy we may be able to give our kids is a healthy, balanced attitude toward *all* food.

I'm reminded of the fact that my physician father often fed my siblings and I a "Mickey Mouse sundae" before bed "for sweet dreams." This consisted of a scoop of vanilla ice cream covered in chocolate sauce with two cookies placed as ears. Now that I think of it, rather than getting revved up, I usually did sleep soundly after that treat and the dreams always were extra sweet...