



The First Takeaway

Just as kids of a certain generation were urged to delay their first sex act, can today's children delay their first taste of junk food?

Rodney Muhumuza

Not so many months ago, in a memorable Twitter update, the well-known nutritionist Peter Kasenene posted a photo of him and his young daughter eating at a restaurant in Kampala. There had been a minor dispute over what to eat, and the girl had reminded her father, as if he didn't know, that they were at Frango, not some random place but the hip restaurant inside Nsambya's Arena Mall. So the father, naturally, ate grass while the child, not surprisingly, had her chips and chicken.

As Kasenene's Twitter followers will know, he is a pedant when it comes to what to eat and what to avoid. He shames those who add sugar into milk, those who eat *mandazi*, and those who, at wedding receptions, heap so much food on their plates that the mere act of proceeding to take a seat can seem like manual labor. Yet,

miraculously, these gluttons almost always finish their food, as if they have extra stomachs somewhere into which it is possible to store excess starch.

The problem with Kasenene is that he does not seem interested in understanding why people behave this way. Is it because they are too hungry? Is it because they somehow want to get full value for their cash contributions to the wedding reception? Or is such behavior driven by a herd mentality, the thought that if my neighbor can claim so much food, why can't I do the same?

In the case of the little girl at Frango, beloved Frango, those who follow the nutritionist got no sense of why she had had her way despite any protestations from her father. Was it because she had not tasted junk food for such a long time? Was it because it's futile to argue with a child over food in a public place? That plate of

junk food was almost certainly not her first, and it almost certainly will not be her last, even if she is the daughter of a relentless food preacher.

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To a degree unthinkable three decades ago, when Kampala still looked like a town without a town, the most viable business to operate is fast food. It does not have to be a high-end joint, for it is possible to buy fries by the roadside, packed to go *nicely* in a polythene bag. Those *mamas* have their customers, just as the posh restaurants have their steady stream of clients. While there is no typical junk-food customer, many of these places would almost certainly shut down if there were no children to be served. To sit in a restaurant in Kampala today is to be a silent witness to great food bacchanals orchestrated by parents at the behest – and sometimes even

command – of their own children. *Brionna, I know you want chips and chicken. Abi, what do you want? They also give you chips and chicken?*

The feasts mirror the wider ‘upward’ mobility one sees in Kampala and other cities these days. When it is time to leave, the kids who have gorged on deep-fried chicken thighs are driven back home in SUVs, the sons and daughters of crafty civil servants who themselves may not have developed a taste for junk food until they were young adults. But times change, sometimes as fast as we see in Kampala, so that even infants can be strapped to little seats and presented with fish fingers and chips on a family outing.

The result is an existential crisis of the sort many Ugandans are yet to come to grips with: childhood obesity like never before, childhood obesity as a problem few want to talk about. In reality, the annual increase in childhood obesity stands at 8.4 percent for Uganda, second only to Angola’s 8.5 percent, according to the 2023 World Obesity Atlas, which warns that the prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents in Africa is predicted to “rise rapidly” between now and 2035.

That report by the World Obesity Federation cites global obesity rates so alarming that it is possible half of the entire world will be obese or overweight by 2035 if no mitigating measures are taken. Among children, it said, obesity could more than double from 2020 levels, to 208 million boys and 175 million girls by 2035.

Poor countries such as Uganda pay heavily for childhood obesity because there is virtually no serious investment in the prevention and treatment of it. Everyone is on his or

her own, and when little children are bogged down by their heavy bodies they are simply gawked at, or gossiped about, or even laughed at. A gym instructor I know, a man who looks after many men and women trying to lose excess weight just outside Kampala, one day ran out of words trying to recollect children he had recently seen alighting from cars at the gates of an international school. He said they were too fat. He said their legs were crooked. He said they could not walk properly. Then he attempted to walk like one of the kids he had glimpsed, bending his legs sideways in a crude imitation of lameness while he pressed his hands together in exaggerated shock. The man with whom the gym instructor was speaking, himself the father of an obese child he sometimes brought to the gym, looked on and shook his head knowingly. He blamed the child’s mother, saying she fed their children too much chapati and other junk food when he was not looking, said she had failed to grasp the full import of what was at stake.

Childhood obesity, of course, is a very sensitive subject. Very few parents will gather the courage to tell their kids that they are fat. The parents of these children will not want to admit their own failures, at least not to each other. They will make superficial concessions, say by stupidly denying the children milk when they actually need milk. They will trade blame. They will take the kids on exculpatory walks about the estate in which they live. They may even fight over it when the time is right. But they may never be able to undo the damage they have done to their children by getting them used to the taste of junk food early, so early in life that one is almost impelled to

weep at the mere sight of babies with potato fries dangling like cigarettes between their lips.

These babies have learnt to eat junk food before they have learnt to wipe their own bottoms, and it should be a crime – one that raises fundamental questions about feeding children in a society increasingly set afire by café culture and by a tendency, mostly mental, to emulate what others are doing. Just because the kids return home from school and report that the Melissas said they had been to a nice café on Sunday does not mean that your family needs to eat out tomorrow. As the children have come to take these junk-food outings for granted, so the parents have succumbed to the need to be ‘honorable’ in the eyes of their offspring. To order junk food is to prove one’s love as a parent, a meaningful statement in a country where millions live under the poverty line and millions more live on one meal a day. There are families that set aside Saturdays or Sundays as feast days out, and there are yet others with the means to eat out multiple days in a row. These feast days become the rule, as inviolable as anything the family has honored over the years. These people live to eat and not the other way round, as I once heard, in a restaurant by Dewinton Road, a high-ranking civil servant joke and then break into seismic laughter as a hapless waitress trembled at his feet. Thus, in a way that is identifiably Ugandan, Kampala’s newly rich gourmards are *eating* their money and they want everyone to know. In so doing, they also are raising a generation of children who will discover late in life, or not at all, that plantain can be had boiled, that millet bread goes well with peanut

paste, that sweet potatoes are not an unnatural proposition.

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Our people often say that children will only get used to what their parents get them used to. A child who grows up in a house whose walls are adorned with artworks is perhaps more likely to appreciate the beauty of things than one who grows up in a house with bare walls. A child who grows up in a house full of books is probably more likely to have respect for the written word than one who grows up kicking a football for sheer joy. There will be exceptions, of course, flukes and geniuses who will overcome the peculiarities of their beginnings to become or achieve that which they were not expected to become or achieve. But, still, while it is possible to discover Nina Simone late in life and swear by her, it may not be easy to appreciate the full context in which she sang, in which she forged a voice as soulful as hers, and, obviously, in which others like her came of age. All of which is to say, perhaps incongruously, that if children are tied irremediably to the cultural motifs to which they are exposed early in life, then they surely cannot be expected to renounce the food tastes they have long relished. If they have had it and liked it, whatever it is, they will almost certainly have it again and again. Of course, it must be said now that if a child is going to have an early addiction, any addiction, then let it be a desirable one. Let the child play among the right books, for example, destroy them if necessary. He will grow to like them.

For many of the children who have consumed uncountable plates of junk, even a polite conversation about eating well is likely to be a farce. But that does not preclude an attempt to explain things. I give my young children a firm

no when they come to me sometimes and demand to be taken a café nearby. I tell them I do not have money, sometimes truthfully. I tell them that I am too busy, sometimes truthfully. I tell them that there is food in the house, always truthfully. But they are perceptive beings, and one of them will even try to drag me to the kitchen, there to have me open the dishes and inspect for myself the food of which I speak. *Matooke*? Enough of that. Peas? No way. Vegetables? No, thank you. One of them, still grabbing me by the hand, will plead, “I want something *taaasty*.” They hunger for food they can smell yards away, like when I drive back home and they come rushing to open the car doors and sniff every bag I am carrying. If there is something interesting, as sometimes there is, the eldest one will exclaim ironically, “What’s that smell?” while the younger one digs his hands into one shopping bag after another. But I also see the disappointment in their faces when I come empty-handed, and as they shrug and walk away they invariably ask, “But why, Daddy, why?” It is a question every parent should be able to answer, or at least try to, not one to ignore or avoid.

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One day in July 2023 Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, the famous cartoonist and online activist, wrote on Twitter of “the extent of the problem of OBESITY among children” in urban schools. It seemed he had been to a few schools recently, wondering why some children “can’t even climb [six] stairs without resting!” More importantly, he asked, “What advice would you give to their parents?” Spire, who is nothing if not an intellectual, does not raise trivial matters, and mostly he throws stones at corrupt officials in government service

and elsewhere. So when he raised the question about the obese children he had seen, it seems his many followers read between the lines. He was not going after the children. It was their parents he was hitting. As expected, he received hundreds of messages in reply, most of them acerbic musings on the inadequacies of parents who watch as their children become fat. A lot of the comments urged an end to the theft of public resources, with one man asserting that childhood obesity “is a direct consequence of too much stolen money,” and some others called for the closure of certain high-end restaurants dominating the market. Quite a few observed that if the parents are more often than not obese, then they probably do not need anyone’s advice regarding their children.

Reading the comments to Spire’s post – and in the end they were too many to keep pace with, reflecting at least the severity of the matter – I was left disappointed that none had tried to address the matter from a sort of PG framework. If it is not appropriate to gift a twelve-year-old girl a copy of *Anna Karenina*, if it is irresponsible to expose a child to violent movies, if it is not cool to lie to a child, why should it be O.K. for a five-year-old to have long developed a taste for junk food? And I thought, not for the first time, that some people have not been here long enough, or, if they have, then some things they have simply forgotten.

For if obesity, and precisely that afflicting children, is the great challenge of our times, for the generation of Ugandans born in the 70s and 80s it was the slimming disease AIDS. Those kids were terrorized by messaging around the lethality of the HIV virus, succumbing to the fear factor that helped bring down the AIDS rate in the time before treatment

became widely available. Well, AIDS is AIDS and obesity is obesity, but I see lessons from that chapter of our lives: if those children could be asked to delay their first sex act for as long as possible, apparently with some success, can today's children be helped to delay their first plate of junk food?

Today's children, I have told you, will have eaten uncountable plates of junk food by the time they are teenagers. They do not pay for the meals. They do not drive themselves to fast-food restaurants. They know of junk food only because their parents have allowed it. As simple as it may sound to others, for me it is astonishing to think that I had my first plate of junk food as a 12-year-old boy while, in 2023, my eight-year-old son has already eaten plenty. My first one was not even classic junk food, a plate of chips and the chaps I wished were chicken, back in 1993. I was a candidate for the Primary Leaving Examination, one of many

boys and girls who on weekends would be smuggled for last-minute coaching in the compound of a forgettable secondary school near Bombo Road. In the quietness of that place, away from the prying eyes of authorities, our teachers broke the law so we might pass with flying colors, but also so that they could boost their earnings. We were there because of them, and they were there because of us.

My mother was spending heavily so that I could attend, and I think I dodged a session one sultry afternoon in order to be able to buy my first plate of chips and chaps, the cheapest junk food at Fido Dido. It did not matter that my classmates were going for the real stuff – chips and chicken – inside that smoky, heat-giving hall in which, for the first time, a schoolboy saw so many people lining up for food they intended to pay for. It was a revelation, and later, after I had returned to the classroom and

sat among others fidgeting with their paper bags, I was grateful that my time had come at last. A bag of chips and chaps to eat and to enjoy, off my mother's sweat, at the expense of one teacher, with dirty hands, for the very first time in my life. It was, in all honesty, a coming-of-age event just as momentous as any of the other *first times* that came later.

Even if that junk meal three decades ago had been my first and last, I would still remember everything: the soggy fries, the crimson tomato paste, the triangular chaps that tasted like the poultry they were not, even the greasy paper bag that begged to be eaten but which, mercifully, I only used to wipe my hands. To partake of junk food today is, for me, to commune with time and to untangle the threads of personal history. But today's children, today's *poor* babies – they may know too much so early, for better or worse, but what will they remember? ■

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