

When the carrot becomes the stick...

The problem of getting kids to eat what's good for them. By **Susan Daly**

The news that 99pc of packed lunches are nutritionally unbalanced came as a stark statistic this week.

Researchers at Leeds University in the UK found that crisps, sweets and sugary drinks take precedence over fruit, vegetables and dairy products in school children's lunchboxes.

That's bad enough in a country where half of all children can at least avail of nutritionally-sound school dinners. In Ireland, where school canteens don't exist, a healthy packed lunch is even more important.

"I wish some parents realised that," said one Montessori teacher at a Dublin inner city community crèche. "Based on what some of my kids come in with in the morning, I don't hold out much hope for them settling for an apple and a ham sandwich when they go to big school.

"Some of the parents give the kids sausage rolls from Centra on the way in. They promise them sweets to get them out of the house. It makes our job really difficult because they're cranky when the sugar buzz wears off."

Most primary schools in Ire-

land now offer healthy eating guidelines to parents and some impose strict regulations on children bringing junk food to school. The Department of Agriculture has been funding a healthy-eating programme in primary schools since 2007 called the Food Dudes. Michael Maloney from An Bord Bia, which runs the scheme, says it has been rolled out to 1,340 of the State's 3,500 primary schools so far. They supply fruit and veg for an initial 16 days, encouraging the children through a series of non-edible rewards to taste raw foods.

"In primary schools, you don't find vending

machines but I know, anecdotally, they are available in some secondary schools, and if not, teenagers can go up the street and buy what they want in a shop," says Michael Maloney. "I know that certainly the earlier you can change children's behaviour and attitudes, the better.

"The programme was developed by Fergus Lowe, a psychologist, so it's all about changing behaviours.

Children don't like to be different but because it's introduced from infants right up to sixth class, the whole culture changes."

Teenagers are a totally different kettle of battered fish. When I worked and lived in an affluent

south Dublin suburb — the type of place that knew its whole-meal pitta and hummus from its Tayto sandwiches — the queue for the wedges counter in the local shop at school lunchtime was out the door.

This isn't just about teens having more disposable income. One adult acquaintance admitted to a teenage love of mayonnaise sandwiches while another said his schoolbag was a living organism by the end of each term from all the uneaten sandwiches.

Dr Muireann Cullen, manager of the Nutrition and Health Foundation, says that getting teens involved in what they bring to school is helpful. "There is no such thing as a bad food," she says, "If kids say they want X, Y and Z one day, it's alright to say, 'Fine, but tomorrow, we'll balance it out with these other foods', and explain why.

"Remember those mothers in the Jamie Oliver programme, pushing 'banned' foods through the school railings to their kids? That was about personal choice. Once everyone was included in the decision-making, that problem was taken away."

