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Persuasive Essay

You Are What You Eat: *What's the Cost of Prada versus Nada?*

When a parent goes to the store to buy a meal for their family, they are faced with large amounts of product to choose from. Much like shopping for a piece of clothing, we see high-priced organic produce dressed in all-natural packaging and look over at chips marked down in the check-out lane. It's obvious as we walk through our grocery stores to see that the items that hold the most nutritional value are those that are marked up the highest. It's easy to see that health comes at a price. The decision about which product that parent will be able to take home is often tied to income restrictions. Not only is it unfair that our food markets have made it so that it is cheaper and easier to buy these less nutritious items, it is clear that some families have no option to even choose to eat right. From the limitations of their paychecks to the governmental nutritional funding they may receive, these low-income families aren't eating right, and it's having expectable effects.

With dollar menus sprouting at many fast-food chains, it's evident that eating healthy is the more expensive and inaccessible option (*Food, Inc.*). This means that high-caloric and unsatisfying nutritional values are taking place of homemade prepared meals with ingredients bought from the grocery store. When a head of lettuce is the same price as a burger, the more filling meal takes place (*Food, Inc.*). Our food system has been skewed to have these foods cost less and be more available. This cost reduction on premade food is having an effect on not only health, but lessons that are learned in the kitchen about nutrition. When people cook their own

food, they make better choices. When families eat together, they're more stable (Bittman). The nutrition that is gained in preparing our own meals goes far beyond a vitamin.

Eating properly and including adequate nutritional balance is a cost that some families simply cannot afford. In a study conducted by the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, the cost of an average basket of "nutritional" food was calculated in different locations (Jetter & Cassady). The healthy shopping carts included lean meats and whole-grain options. These carts were then compared to an average basket of families who lived in the area. The healthy baskets ended up costing 35-40% more in the family's food budget (Jetter & Cassady). Eating healthy was proven to be expensive and quite unaffordable to a family whose food budget, according to the study, averaged \$2,410 a year (Jetter & Cassady). The higher prices on low-fat and whole grains give families no option but to purchase a lower-quality meal, thus increasing obesity rates and overall health problems.

Health problems related to food can be found within subset populations. These populations can be found within lower-income regions. Fast-food chains are not only selling foods that aren't satisfying the recommended dietary intake, but what little grocery stores may be present in the area also have no chance at competing. In smaller grocery stores, it was concluded that less nutritional options are more readily available (Jetter & Cassady). This makes areas where the lowest-earning individuals live the highest-priced places to purchase lean meats and produce. It puts families that are already at the highest risk of not receiving proper nutrition at an even greater risk because these foods are marked up even higher in their area. Not having healthy options more available in these areas leads to children being most at risk for health complications because of the options that surround them.

Indeed, children who come from lower-income families trend the highest for improper nutrition and nutritional deficiencies. A study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* concludes that children who come from lower-income families are much more likely to experience food insufficiency (Frongillo, Alaimo & Briefel). In the study, children of ages five to sixteen were surveyed and asked questions about their household. Children who answered that they sometimes or often did not get enough food to eat were classified as “food insufficient.” The results concluded that children who fit the criteria were associated with increased cases of iron deficiency, stomachaches, and headaches (Frongillo, Alaimo & Briefel). These are clear signs that these children who were coming from food-insufficient families were not receiving proper nutrition. Even though these children were not eating enough to begin with, they weren’t eating right when they did receive the chance.

Compounding the problem is the fact that eating the wrong foods is leading to other health problems, such as obesity. According to the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, in a study conducted from 1971 to 2002, a clear pattern between lower socioeconomic demographics and poor health was established (Whang & Zhang). They concluded in their study that children were more at risk to become obese living in a lower-income family than older people living in the home. Children in these situations of having improper nutrition are most at risk to develop health problems such as obesity (Whang & Zhang). It’s cheaper and more accessible for these children to receive the wrong foods; many times this is what ends up happening when their parents aren’t left with choices, even when someone is trying to help.

Government-supplied food services may also be unintentionally pushing these foods. A study conducted by the *Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* followed a group of mothers who used WIC, a nutrition service for women, infants, and children (Faith, Dennison,

Edmunds & Stratton). It was established early in the study that fruit juice had a direct effect on weight increase in infants. The results showed an increased number of mothers on WIC offering their children fruit juice rather than fresh produce because of the vouchers they had been given. Infants who were on WIC consequently had a higher risk of becoming obese. The study concluded that programs such as WIC should cut their juice consumption in half (Faith, Dennison, Edmunds & Stratton). These governmental programs need improvement.

Clearly, children who need assistance from governmental programs aren't getting a good enough start. Programs such as WIC should be pushing more fresh produce and giving mothers the money to buy it. Furthermore, companies should be giving parents truthful information about the juices they are choosing for their children. "Nearly everything labeled 'healthy' or 'natural' is not" (Bittman). Many parents could be making the mistake of thinking that these fruit juices are nourishing their children, when in reality, they clearly aren't. These babies aren't being given the same start as other babies because our markets are lying about products and marking up unprocessed items. Our governmental help agencies are pushing for change, but not strongly enough.

On the up side, there are many movements to try and educate children about eating healthy. First Lady Michelle Obama has launched an initiative to get kids to eat right and get out of the house to exercise, known as Let's Move ("About Let's Move"). She even paired up with the children's TV program *Sesame Street* to share her message with all of its viewers. The problem of getting kids to eat right is bigger than just the message, however; it's also about making it affordable to families. Children may know that produce contains more nutritional content than a bag of potato chips, but until we make both choices, at minimum, the same cost, the correlation between obesity and low in-come children will remain.

Much change can take place in allocation of food services. Food-related deaths are far more common than those resulting from terrorism, yet the F.D.A.'s budget is about one-fifteenth that of Homeland Security (Bittman). It's obvious that our food system needs more attention and redirection. These changes that we could be making will definitely have positive effects on other issues surrounding low-income families. Subsidies need to be seen in places where youth are, such as school lunch programs. When these foods are made affordable, produce will appear on their plate (Bittman). We need to make healthy options available to all children, and we can start with establishments already in place.

There are clear problems with nutrition related to low-income families. There is a lack of access for those who live in lower-income areas caused by increased cost of healthy items. There is also a clear increase in children who are obese and come from low-income families, because they are being forced to consume the wrong foods. It is important that we make healthy foods more affordable and available to all people, especially children. Changes need to be made to programs already in place and redirected with better information. Making these foods more accessible to lower-income families will provide children with a better start at life. There is nothing more important than what we choose to put in our bodies, and low-income families need better options. We're not talking about a piece of clothing; we're talking about the future of America and what options they're getting at the start of life.

Works Cited

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