

Jamie Oliver has caused a real stir with his attack on the standards of school meals. Dinner staff nationwide have hit back, claiming that they do serve nutritionally-balanced dinners and many do. I have seen articles giving sample menus - all of them sounding healthy and delicious.

But the crunch question is do children choose them or are they attracted to the asterisk at the bottom of one sample menu which said in very small print: "Burgers and chips also served daily"? I think we know the answer. I have watched children ignore the perfectly-cooked roast and vegetables and the crispy salad bar to choose the chips and beans every single time.

The answer is to take the chips off the menu. However, as long as children have a choice over where they eat lunch, then school dinner staff have to offer what they want or they might as well sign their own redundancy notices.

Another problem is the small amount of money that is spent on school dinners. This leads catering staff to buy processed food, which is often cheap. The meat products are made from the leftovers and there's less wastage with processed foods. Pizzas and hotdogs can almost be cooked on demand. That's not so easy with fresh vegetables.

However, the problem with processed foods is that you often get hidden ingredients - surprising amounts of salt, sugar and fat which make it difficult to moderate how much you eat of these food groups.

Food manufacturers could help by flagging up the levels of salt, sugar and fat in processed foods in simple terms such as low, medium and high - just as we have with tar levels in cigarettes - and that could be reproduced for dishes served in school canteens.

However, this won't be enough to save our children from obesity and the nightmare list of illnesses that it brings in its wake.

We can have the information, but still choose badly. I know chips are a fatty food. I know that cheese is a fatty food. So why did I choose cheesy chips from the chippy on Saturday? I wasn't even that hungry, but it's what my tastebuds wanted. We have become so used to high fat/salt/sugar foods that we are almost addicted to them - a point well-made in the documentary film "Supersize Me", which showed the reporter feeling tired and sick if he didn't get his fix of junk food. Fifteen years ago, I taught English to Spanish children. To practise some food vocabulary, I asked every child to name their favourite food. I was astonished that sweets, chocolate, and crisps were not mentioned - even after prompting - just fruit.

How do we ensure that children here give the same, healthy answers? We need a watertight system of set school meals - no spending dinner money down the chippy - and, harshest of all, expelling the chip.