

SMALL BITES

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Introduction

Feeding children is seemingly one of the most natural things we do as humans. Yet a perusal of media accounts indicates a crisis in children's nutrition, either real or perceived depending on your viewpoint. Since the 1980s, child obesity rates have risen steadily around the globe (Lobstein and Jackson-Leach 2016). Headlines abound about child obesity, and it has been predicted by some researchers that, due to increases in diet-related diseases, children will not live as long as the previous generation (Olshansky et al. 2005). Parents, caregivers, educators, and concerned citizens worry about what food children should be eating, and public health dietitians respond by stating that children are being fed too much sugar and fat and that they're not eating enough fruit and vegetables.

Despite an abundance of concern among health professionals, there is at the same time widespread apathy among many policy-makers and the general public. Canadians and Americans feed children food full of refined grains, fat, sugar, salt, and chemical additives. They eat a steady stream of fast-food burgers and fries, sugary breakfast cereals, cheese sticks, soda pop, highly sugared fruit drinks, chicken nuggets and fingers, and instant macaroni and cheese in a box, just to name a few of the ultra-processed, commercial food products that are marketed to children. Many children grow up believing that this is tasty food, never having eaten fresh fruit or vegetables and home-cooked meals. This is a product of socioeconomic inequalities and a food system that produces processed food more cheaply than fresh

food. It is, as well, a story of constructing North American children as fussy eaters, who require different foods from adults, so-called “children’s foods.” So too, children, through the machinations of food industrialists and marketers, exert agency within their families so that they can consume these foods.

At the same time child obesity is on the rise, there are children going hungry. These disparities in access to food are seen most drastically in low-income countries – where there are still many children who experience malnourishment and hunger as a daily reality. But these food access inequities exist in high-income countries too; there is an unconscionably large proportion of children in Canada and the United States who live in food-insecure households.

How did we get to this state? How can an understanding of human evolution inform paediatric nutrition? How do we parse the need for special nutrition for young children from the manufacture of children’s food by the industrial food system? How are children paradoxically fed so well and so poorly nourished at the same time? How do we protect children from the food industry while at the same time navigate the reality of a commodity-driven system in which food is part of a billion-dollar industry? Is it only parents’ responsibility to feed children or should we collectively share the duty to make sure it’s done well? How do our values about children and feeding them become embodied in our children through our sociocultural approaches to childhood and their food? How do we make sure there is equitable access to food and nourishment for all children?

Throughout this book I attempt to answer these questions to forge a path towards improving children’s nutritional well-being. I do this using an anthropological approach that looks back to our evolutionary heritage and continues historically through time and space to the twenty-first century. I focus on the evolutionary underpinnings of infant and young child feeding, parsing biological from sociocultural factors, which require equal attention and ultimately cannot be disentangled. I examine the rise of the industrial food system that began in North America and spread worldwide through the increasing globalization of multinational food corporations and food commodities. I then take a cross-cultural approach by examining children’s food in several particular and contrasting settings around the world – Nepal, France, Japan, Canada, and the United States – exploring how we feed our children as a reflection of our cultural approaches to childhood and food in these societies. While the scope of the book is international, there is a strong Canadian lens through which I compare and contrast child food and

nutrition in Canada to other countries. Finally, I address current social and paediatric nutrition dilemmas – namely, undernutrition and obesity.

This book is based on my scholarly and community-based research over the past twenty-five years. As an anthropologist, I have worked in various settings, including in the nations of Nepal, Canada, and France. In Nepal, my focus was on child growth and the health of the children of carpet-making workers living just outside of Kathmandu. I researched rural-to-urban migrants who had moved to the city to do wage labour. These families raised their children in this impoverished, urban environment, and I examined the effects of this environment on children's nutritional health. On the upside they had wage earnings to enable them to access some health care and to buy food, but, on the downside, they lived without clean water and sanitation, and relied on market food instead of freshly grown village foods. In Canada I studied elementary school children's diets and school environments in relation to child overweight and obesity. Though a very different setting from Nepal, there were similar themes of disadvantage affecting the nutritional health of children living in food-insecure households, resulting in malnutrition, sometimes in the form of overweight and obesity. Finally, I conducted research in France, in collaboration with a co-investigator working in Japan, to consider the place of school meal programs in addressing child nutrition and obesity prevention. Through this work I also explored the place of school meal programs in France and Japan as a site of social and cultural reproduction through culinary nationalism, a phenomenon I call "gastro-citizenship."

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The other hat I wear, in addition to being an anthropologist, is that of a white, middle-class parent who has raised two children in an urban setting from the beginning of the twenty-first century and who has found feeding children to be as fraught these days as any other aspect of raising a child. With all the parenting manuals and media advice from pregnancy right through to negotiating daycare and school food, parents are constantly being supplied and admonished with conflicting advice. I have personally endured this and thus can relate to the wider experiences of other caregivers who also face these challenges. My experiences also connect with those of educators and health care and food/nutrition providers, who are concerned about the nutritional health and well-being of children and future generations. I realize, however, that my personal experiences of feeding my children are filtered through a privileged lens, which I try to point out throughout the book, but ultimately this lens biases the perspectives I present.

I present these personal and research experiences using a variety of theoretical approaches that are academic but that I believe are relevant to how we frame the problems and the solutions we propose.

Theoretical Approaches

In this book I employ multiple theoretical approaches from anthropology and other social sciences that complement and at the same time intersect with one another. I begin with a foundational evolutionary approach, in particular life history theory, which hypothesizes the evolution of species-specific key life history phases and traits related to reproduction, growth and development, mortality, and ecology that has also been applied to *Homo sapiens* (Chisholm 1993; Hill and Kaplan 1999). For example, unlike other mammals, and even other primates, human children mature slowly and depend on adults for most of their childhood, with adolescence as a transitional stage that is unique in delayed maturation (Reiches 2019). *Homo sapiens* engage in a long period of learning and apprenticeship; thus, we have always had the profound privilege and responsibility to nurture our children. For much of our evolutionary history this nurturing rested not only on parents but also on grandparents, older siblings, and various extended relatives (Blaffer Hrdy 2009).

Today that responsibility extends to some institutions such as day-cares and schools. Feeding children is one of the most vital aspects of this care and yet perhaps one of the most challenging. In the past the simple act of having enough food to feed children posed a major difficulty for many people. That is still the case for many in the contemporary world but now with added complications for those with abundance in determining what and how to feed children. There are no simple answers to current dilemmas in child nutrition. I believe, however, that the holistic perspective of anthropology allows us to step back from the hype described above to critically consider where our species came from, where we are situated in this current capitalist and global food system, and how we want to shape our future societal approaches to feeding children.

My hope is that by understanding the bigger picture we can get away from making children little nutrition projects, as we are apt to do in this era of “nutritionism” (Scrini 2012), where we count nutrients in every mouthful. To counter nutritionism in this book, I consciously make a distinction between children’s food/child feeding and children’s nutrition, as inspired

by the understanding of the distinction between foods and nutrients eloquently outlined by Rozin and Vollmecke (1986, 434, emphasis mine).

People eat food, not nutrients. Although foods stimulate the chemosensory, visual, thermal and tactile senses, it is the mental representation invoked by this stimulation that is critical to humans' response: we respond to the mental representation of foods in order to identify particular items as either edible or not. The food itself is at once a source of nutrition, a source of harmful microorganisms or toxins, a great source of pleasure and satisfaction, and a vehicle for the expression of social relations and values.

In keeping with this understanding that the practice and thought humans put into food/eating and human nutrition at the biological level are both separate and yet intertwined, I employ a biocultural approach.

Biocultural Framework

The biocultural framework, more commonly referred to as "biosocial" in Europe and the UK,¹ is at its most basic level the recognition that human biology, health, and nutrition are fundamentally shaped by the biophysical, social, cultural, political, and economic environments in which we live. As humans we are extremely adaptable to different environments, and that is reflected in the wide variety of diets we have consumed as a species from the Arctic to the extreme southern latitudes (Leonard 2002). Human biology – particularly our genetic inheritance, our microbiota, our requirements for certain nourishment – may also shape our social and cultural worlds, so the relationship among these factors is interactive and dialectical. In anthropology the biocultural approach has been most explicitly formulated among American biological, medical, and nutritional anthropologists. A review of biocultural approaches used by anthropologists in scholarly research demonstrates, however, that the approach is often defined very loosely or not at all (Wiley and Cullin 2016). I suggest this looseness is convenient as it enables researchers to use it flexibly in their studies.

Biocultural approaches began in the 1970s in biological anthropology with a focus on population adaptations to environmental stressors such as high altitude, malnutrition, and disease risk. They were also taken up by bioarchaeologists studying past populations (Zuckerman and Martin 2016), and, more recently, anthropologists have conceptualized resource insecurities such as food and water as environmental stressors (Brewis, Piperata,

and Thompson 2020). Writing from the perspective of nutritional anthropology, Peltó, Dufour, and Goodman (2013, 2) describe ecological studies of food and nutrition as paying holistic attention to “biological and social forces in shaping human food use and the nutritional status of individuals and population,” but they go on to say that “the hallmark of a biocultural approach is the examination of interactions among them.” Since the 1990s, some scholars have been actively developing the biocultural approach in more explicit ways. Andrea Wiley (1992) emphasizes the importance of considering evolutionary context and the concept of adaptation to changing environments as a fundamental aspect of the biocultural approach. In *Medical Anthropology: A Biocultural Approach*, Wiley and Allen define the biocultural perspective as a consideration of “the social, ecological, and biological aspects of health issues, and how these interact within and across populations,” while still maintaining that “the body has also been shaped by a history – an evolutionary history – during which it has been molded by changing environmental conditions” (Wiley and Allen 2013, 8). Hicks and Leonard (2014) extend this definition by arguing that, though our biology constrains specific patterns of growth and development that have been inherited through our human evolution, as a species we experience developmental plasticity that is linked to and shaped by our political economy and culture. Goodman and Leatherman (1998) imprint the biocultural approach with a critical and Marxist analysis, arguing that human health and biology are fundamentally shaped by access to material resources; their description of the approach, while not fundamentally different from those described above, pays close attention to the social processes of power and structural constraints at both local and global levels on individuals and populations. This focus on political economy has led to labelling these approaches as “critical biocultural” because they elucidate how local and global political economic processes are literally embodied as they “get under the skin” (Goodman and Leatherman 1998; Hertzman and Boyce 2010; Leatherman and Goodman 2019).

Some key features of the biocultural approach include the focus on “local or situated biologies,” as opposed to the standardized or universal body, which recognizes the entanglement of sociocultural and biological processes through embodiment (Brewis, Piperata, and Thompson 2020; Krieger 2005; Lock 2017). Critical biocultural studies of embodiment include investigating health disparities due to social and cultural inequalities linked to race, gender, indigeneity, colonialism, and poverty (Gravlee 2009; Krieger 2016; Kuzawa and Sweet 2009; Leatherman, Hoke, and Goodman 2016;

Schell 2020). Related to the concept of embodiment, and relevant to a focus on children's food and nutrition, is consideration of the lifecourse or early origins, which is fundamental to understanding the developmental origins of health and disease. This approach focuses on stressors in the maternal environment (nutrition, stress, toxins) that affect the unborn baby and its health throughout the lifecourse and even beyond to the next generation (Ellison 2005; Kuzawa and Quinn 2009). As Nicholas Nisbett (2019, 10) states: "In sharing socio-structural determinants as well as being inherited from maternal nutrition, malnutrition can therefore be considered as an intergenerational form of embodied poverty: a key way of transmitting the conditions of poverty through the generations." This critical approach to nutrition within the biocultural framework aligns with those in critical food studies described next.

Critical Food Studies

Scholars of critical food studies apply interdisciplinary approaches – including social, nutritional, and environmental sciences – to understand how food systems work and to imagine alternative futures for those systems (Koç, Sumner, and Winson 2012). In this book I reference "the food system" and "food systems" repeatedly. The "food system," as described by Sobal, Khan, and Bisogni (1998), is often metaphorically described as "from field to table," which is a quick way of characterizing a conceptually complex system that involves multiple intersecting sectors of food production, consumption, maintenance of human nutritional health, and social relationships involving food. Within the food system there are smaller complex systems, including agriculture, industry and trade, economics, health, politics, and sociocultural practices and values. While there have been multiple food systems through time and space, based on a variety of food production methods (including gathering and hunting/fishing) as well as distribution systems (subsistence and communal food sharing), the modern food system, which now feeds most of the 9 billion people on the planet and is highly integrated, is based on industrial agriculture and distribution through a capitalist economic system. This is depicted in [Figure I.1](#).

As with the critical biocultural approach, scholars of critical food studies aim to reveal structural forces and barriers to nutritional health and well-being by taking a systems approach with a focus on political economy. This approach is nicely illustrated by Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston in their

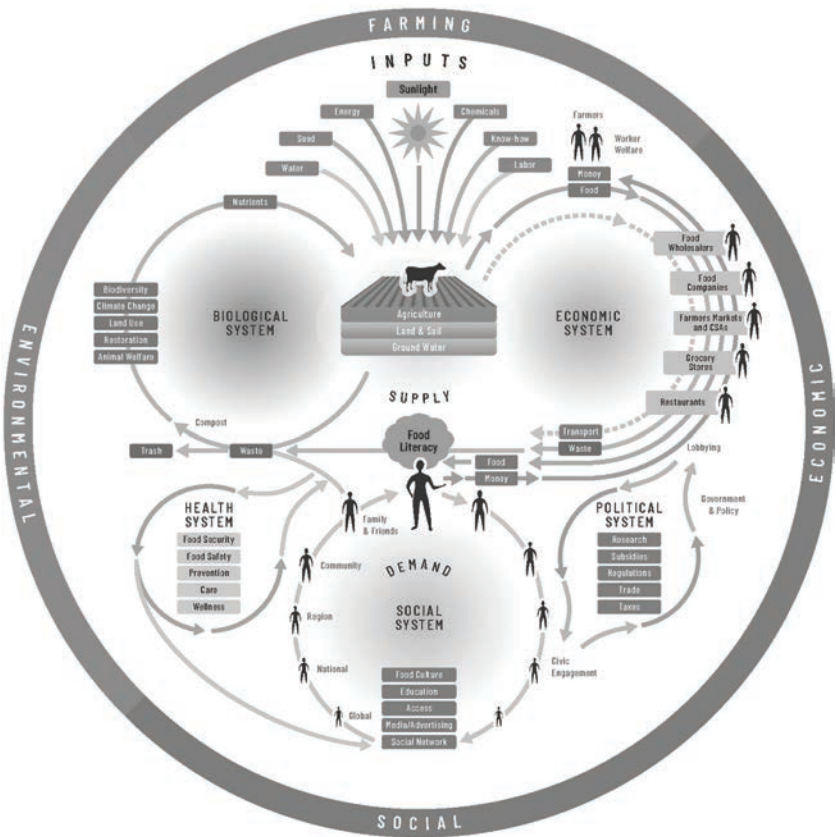


FIGURE 1.1 Food systems map depicting the modern agri-food system. | Courtesy WorldLink, www.nourishlife.org.

discussion of how the state applies hegemonic strategies to disinvest itself from taking responsibility for nutritional health and well-being:

Food is commonly framed through the lens of individual choice: you can *choose* to eat healthily; a mother *chooses* to make dinner each evening because cooking is an activity she enjoys. This individualized framing appeals to a popular desire to experience agency, but draws attention away from the structural obstacles that shape and stratify individual food choices – especially in a neoliberal context where the state has transferred responsibility for food onto individual consumers (e.g. the expectation that mothers seeking to protect their children from pesticides and chemicals must purchase expensive organic produce). (Cairns and Johnston 2015, 13)

Similarly, Raj Patel (2012), in his book *Stuffed and Starved*, investigates the neoliberal and capitalist basis of the global food system to understand current nutritional problems and dilemmas through a critical food studies lens. Patel argues that the global food system, with its main goal as profit, has shaped and constrained our access and appetites for certain types of food that are in overabundance for some and not available for others. In considering food systems we must remember that food and nutrition systems are connected to and affected by many other complex and adaptive systems, including environmental, governmental, transportation, health care, and political-economic systems, and within all of these systems we must be attuned to social inequities that become embodied in individuals and communities (Nisbett 2019). Scholars working within the critical food studies framework are not only focused on understanding how food systems and biological and nutritional outcomes have come to be but also on how they can take an activist stance to improve systems going forward. This is relevant to children's food and nutrition since children's ability to gain access to nutritious foods necessary for their growth and development depends on adults' willingness to fight for their right to food and to protect them from ultra-processed food items that are driven by food industry profits.

Researchers using a critical food studies lens also examine widely used concepts such as "healthy food/eating." Though national food/dietary guides are perceived to be authoritative guides to healthy food/eating, they are also influenced by the food industry and food politics. The US Food Pyramid, for example, was heavily shaped by lobbying by the meat and dairy industries (Nestle 2002). As well, lay definitions of "healthy food" vary by individual sociodemographic backgrounds. In a qualitative study of 105 Canadians from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman, and Beagan (2008) found three predominant though overlapping discourses in discussions of "healthy eating": cultural/traditional, mainstream, and complementary/ethical. The cultural/traditional discourse is held by those who identify with a specific ethnicity and who hold that food from their ethnic traditions or what they ate in their home/countries is healthiest; similarly, those who think about food in ethical terms (e.g., local/environmental and/or vegetarian/vegan) have very different conceptualizations of healthy food from what is found in mainstream discourses. In North America, gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status all factor into peoples' values and cognition attached to "healthy eating/food" that revolve around multiple concepts such as "low fat," natural versus unprocessed

foods, balance, disease prevention or managing an existing disease, and controlling weight (Winter Falk et al. 2001).

Throughout *Small Bites*, I am mindful that what constitutes healthy food/eating will depend on the reader's perspective, which may vary considerably from mine. Nevertheless, as there is a need to make some differentiation between "healthy" and "unhealthy" food/eating when discussing children's food and nutrition, for the purposes of this book I define "healthy food/eating" as an approximation of the most recent *Canada Food Guide* (Government of Canada 2019a), which emphasizes high consumption of fresh plant foods and a variety of other foods that are minimally processed. Whether everyone can or wants to eat this kind of diet is another issue that I address throughout the book.

Social Studies of Children and Childhood

While not as relevant to studies of food and nutrition as the other theoretical approaches explained above, perspectives from social studies of children and childhood are fundamental to the study of children's food and nutrition. Though my conception of infancy and childhood is rooted in the physiological and developmental phenomena that are shaped by evolutionary forces (Bogin 2010) as a starting point, it is further enlightened by the understanding that childhood as an institution and our treatment of children is modified by social and cultural forces. This latter point is articulated in Allison James and Alan Prout's edited volume *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. In this volume they call attention to children and childhood as subjects of serious scholarly recognition, and they set out "central tenets of the emergent paradigm" in childhood sociology, which begin with an understanding of the institution of childhood as a social and cultural construction that varies through time and across cultures (James and Prout 1997, 3).

Since that publication, there has been a re-emergence of anthropology in the study of children and childhood (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007), with a number of volumes related to children and childhood in present and past societies (Beauchesne and Agarwal 2018; Lewis 2006; Panter-Brick and Smith 2000). Though anthropological ethnographies of contemporary societies have often considered children, most of them have considered children and childhood from afar, as opposed to gaining children's own perspectives as research participants. Anthropological research about children's food and consumption from this former perspective is exemplified by a

collection of studies in *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children, and Social Change*, edited by Jun Jing (2000). There are, however, researchers who have worked with children as active participants. Janet Patino's (2020) ethnography of an Atlanta charter school community, *The Trouble with Snack Time*, for example, though mainly focused on parents' voices about children's snack food at school, does include some children's voices in the mix. No matter how the research is approached, however – whether children are active participants or whether they are understood through the eyes of adults – the concept that children and the institution of childhood are malleable to social and cultural forces is fundamental to considering how we feed our children and how children themselves may be agents in shaping the food they eat.

The Book's Menu

The structure and content of *Small Bites* is driven by the central argument that children's food and nutrition cannot be considered in isolation from larger understandings of food, environmental, social, cultural, political, and economic systems. Contemporary nutrition problems such as child obesity and undernutrition must be addressed as societal issues that are linked to current problems with the industrial food system as well as social inequities that are embedded in the global capitalist food system. Using an anthropological lens, I advocate for a wider perspective, moving from the usual focus on children and their families, mostly their mothers, to a concern for children's food and nutrition that extends beyond the individual and household unit to larger institutional organizations such as schools, community organizations, and governments. This includes the recognition that children grow up to become adults who reproduce the next generation, and so our view of children's nutrition and malnutrition must be dynamic and intergenerational. It also includes the recognition that what we feed children is literally an embodiment of social inequities and societal perspectives on children and childhood.

The first two chapters focus on prenatal nutrition, infant, and young children's feeding followed by attention to older children and adolescents. [Chapter 1](#) is an overview of how we feed infants and young children in relation to human evolutionary history and more recent histories. Within this review I also explore how prenatal diet can affect a person's health through their lifecourse and how evolutionary understandings of infant and young child feeding is relevant to contemporary paediatric debates, such as breastfeeding versus bottle-feeding and complementary first foods and their

potential impact on allergies and growth, as well as longer-term impacts on child/adult obesity and diet-related diseases. It becomes clear from this historical review of infant and young child feeding that a trait unique to our species is flexible feeding practices that are influenced by both the constraints on mothers as well as their agency; and, in turn, these are affected by the presence or absence of supports for infant and young child feeding in the wider society.

Chapter 2 explores biocultural variation in child feeding and eating within the context of life history parameters that include the long period of childhood unique to the human species. I present cross-cultural and ethnographic accounts of child feeding and eating among hunter-gatherer children as well as families living in postindustrial societies to explore the parent-child feeding relationship and self-feeding as part of the transitional phases of late childhood and adolescence. While human children display evolved traits such as neophobia (fear of new foods), I parse biologically based from culturally constructed understandings of the way children eat through a comparison of North American versus French approaches to child feeding and eating to interrogate well-known axioms such as “children are picky eaters.”

The subsequent chapters of the book examine issues related to the way we feed children in societies through space and time. They take as a point of departure that childhood is an institution constrained by biological parameters of growth and development but that it is socially and culturally experienced in ways that vary through time and space; the way we feed children at the household, community, national, and international levels reflects socio-cultural values that we attach to children’s lives and their well-being. **Chapter 3** begins with a review of the nutritional needs of children from a physiological perspective, taking into account children’s growth and development with a reminder that, although children have special nutritional requirements, they do not require “special foods” per se. I then move to a historical and cross-cultural review of children’s food that problematizes the creation of “special children’s food,” which, I argue, has been socially and materially constructed by the industrial food system. I describe in detail specific categories of processed foods – fast foods, breakfast cereals, and snack foods – that are not uniquely children’s foods but have been heavily marketed to them. With an eye to an activist approach towards improving food systems and children’s nutrition, I address the issue of marketing and advertising to children, the impact they have had on North American children’s diets, and how we can begin to disrupt and fight back against these commercial forces.

In [Chapter 4](#), I focus on school food and feeding programs as a site of cooperative breeding and caregiving that goes beyond the focus on parents and the immediate family context. Schools are where most children in the world spend much of their lives each day, and they are important sites in the institutionalization of childhood and children's food. Understanding the sociocultural construction of school feeding programs that go back almost a century in some countries is central to considering current approaches to child feeding. Schools, moreover, are increasingly viewed as important sites of child nutrition interventions both for under- and overnutrition. I present two international case studies of children's school meal programs – in France and Japan – and then go on to address the unusual situation that holds in Canada, where there are to date no state-funded school meal programs in place.

The problem of children's food insecurity and malnutrition in both international and North American contexts is presented in [Chapter 5](#). I argue that these problems are rooted in the current global food system, where social and economic inequalities unfairly burden children, the most vulnerable members of society. To that end, I review global statistics on child malnutrition in some of the most troublesome spots in the world: sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. I then discuss child malnutrition as measured through growth and nutrition in Nepal, with reference to the improvement of these indicators over the past twenty years. While the situation is far from perfect in Nepal, improvements there – mainly a result of economic growth, national policy, and international aid – make that nation an exemplar of what can be done to reduce the harmful effects of social inequalities on children's nutritional health and well-being. The second half of the chapter returns to North America to investigate why, in two of the wealthiest nations in the world, Canada and the United States, children still experience food insecurity and malnutrition.

[Chapter 6](#) examines the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century phenomenon of child overweight and obesity. I begin with a primer that reviews the medical categorization and measurement of child overweight and obesity and the underlying biological basis of adiposity. I then review the so-called childhood obesity epidemic, specifically addressing some of the current prevalence data but also reflecting on how we have come to view this issue through a lens of crisis and moral panic about children. I argue that the focus on child obesity as a problem of individuals and families is not helpful in ultimately moving us forward to address underlying determinants of child obesity. These underlying determinants include social inequities

rooted in poverty, racism, and social as well as biophysical environmental deficits where children live, grow, and develop. As an alternate way of viewing the determinants of child obesity that helps us move away from framing it as an issue related to individual diet and physical activity behaviour, I review two scientific theories that link rising obesity to exposure to obesogenic toxins and antibiotics during prenatal and early childhood periods. As part of this paradigm shift in preventing child and adult obesity, I revisit lifecourse theory with a focus on the developmental origins of health and disease and the importance of pregnancy nutrition and infant feeding. Attention to the early origins of life (conception through the first few years) results in treating obesity and nutrition-related diseases as multigenerational problems, removing the blame from individuals and families and placing it on larger societal structures and systems managed by governments.

In conclusion, in [Chapter 7](#) I review the book's main arguments and introduce concrete examples of new directions to address the problems and dilemmas of children's food and nutrition, with a focus on policy and community-level change. I also briefly consider some new challenges for children's food and nutrition (such as climate change) as well as new approaches to youth food activism (such as food justice movements).

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