



The healthy diet market is booming, but are parents being too restrictive in what they allow their kids to eat? Rachel Walker reports

much sugar and processed food. Yet experts warn that putting children on a restricted diet is a well-meaning but misguided fad, fuelled by misinformation. “Adults go on a diet, then, with the best of intentions, put their children on the same diet, without realising the dangers,” says Russell Viner of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. “If it’s not done carefully, it can lead to malnutrition. It sounds obvious, but children grow, and that requires a nutritional balance. Adults who have completed their growth, whose organs are fully developed, can — at their own risk — go on nutrient-depleted diets, but putting your child on a similar diet can quickly put their body into a starvation response, which, in turn, can spark a million nutritional disorders.”

Restricted diets have traditionally been implemented under the supervision of healthcare professionals to control metabolic conditions such as coeliac disease, which affects about 1 in 100 people in the UK. But a booming “wellbeing” market has sparked curiosity about nutrition; studies show a trend for parents to self-diagnose allergies in their children and devise diets to fit. A paper in the *European Journal of Allergy and*

What’s not

Earlier this year, doctors diagnosed an 11-month-old baby in Spain with scurvy after the child was weaned on an almond milk-only diet. It makes a worrying story, but so-called healthy diets for children are on the rise. Last year, a book called *The Secrets of Vegan Baby Nutrition and Paleo for Babies* was published, alongside online nutrition guides, including one called *How to Detox Children*, which recommends spirulina, chlorella and vegetable juices, as well as the “cleansing benefits of a sauna”.

It’s a trend buoyed by glowing celebrity endorsements. Gwyneth Paltrow, Gisele and Madonna have all reportedly put their children on restricted diets. Then there are the lifestyle bloggers who promote clean-eating plans for children, excluding gluten, dairy, carbohydrates and sugar, labelling anything from birthday cake to baked beans as “toxic”.

Clearly, progress has been made in alerting parents to the harmful effects of soft drinks, too

Clinical Immunology, for example, revealed that 34% of parents claimed their child suffered from an allergy, but on formal testing, the number dropped to just 5%. “There has been an explosion of popular dietary literature, which has influenced people to self-diagnose intolerance or allergies,” confirms Professor Gideon Lack, head of the children’s allergy service at Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust. “Couple this with the boom in high-street nutritionists, self-test allergies and holistic health centres that offer questionable advice and we’re looking at an unregulated mess.”

In the past, diets such as the SlimFast plan or the Dukan were adults-only clubs, but the clean-eating movement promotes cutting out certain food groups as an eating regimen designed to improve the wellbeing of the whole family. Mintel research shows that 11% of households with children under 12 now avoid gluten as part of a “healthy choice”. But is it a healthy choice in reality? “Most restricted diets don’t have a shred of scientific evidence to support them,” Viner says.

Aisling Pigott, a paediatric dietician at the British Dietetic Association, gives the example of “Jennifer”, aged nine, whose parents cut carbs

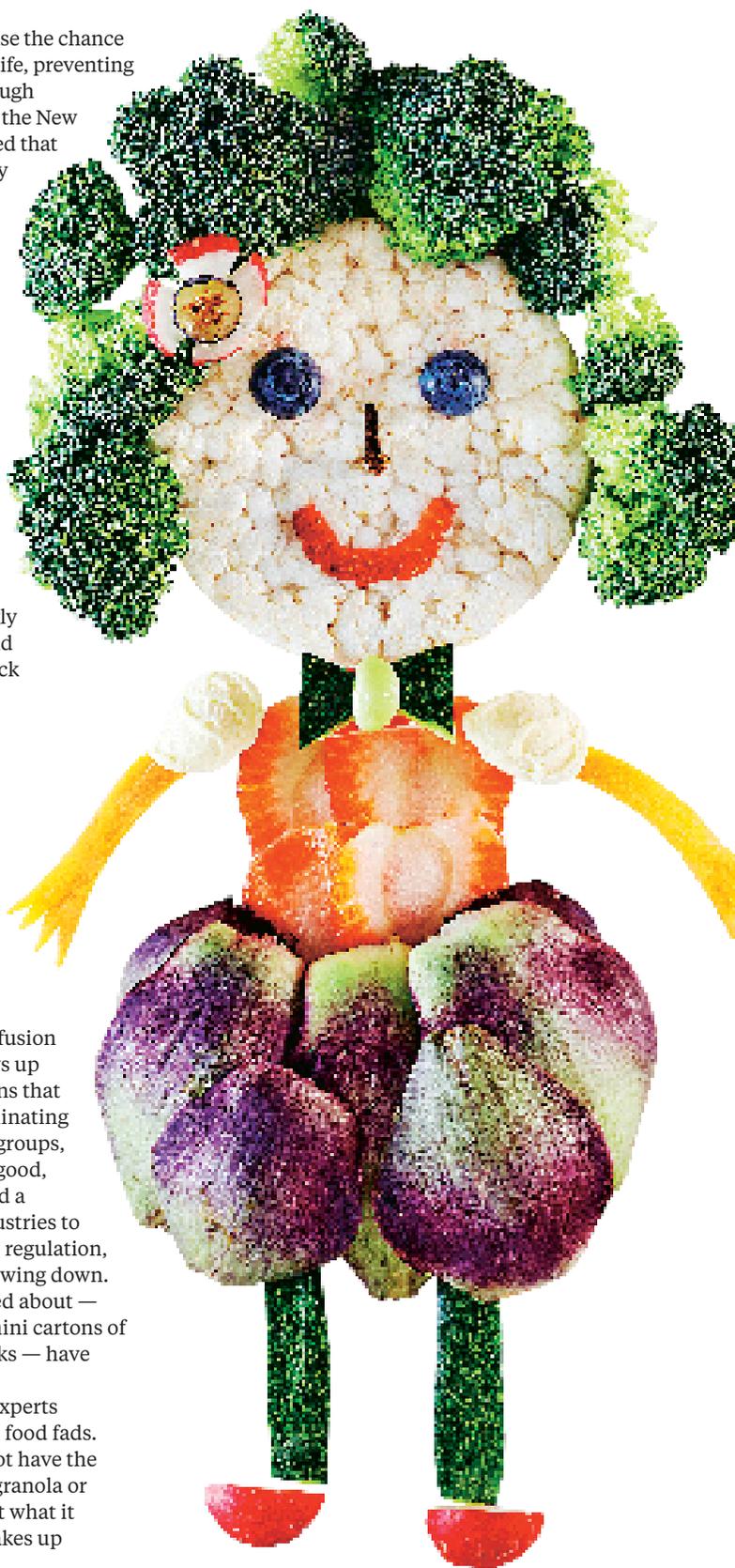
from her diet, to illustrate how restricted diets often have exaggerated effects in growing children. “Jennifer’s parents quickly noticed she had less energy, which made her grumpy, down and tired,” she says. “It was also impacting on her long-term growth and development. It’s a totally inappropriate diet for a child and can quickly result in vitamin and mineral deficiency, and even affect cell development and brain function.”

Similar dangers surround any restricted diet that is implemented without rigorous research — whether baby paleo, gluten-free, or no-fat diets or fasts. Cases have been reported of children brought up on a vegan diet being admitted to hospital with what has been described elsewhere in the press as “the bones of 80-year-olds” and brown teeth “full of cavities”; meanwhile, anecdotal evidence has shown children needlessly brought up on a gluten-free diet struggling to digest gluten when breads and cereals are reintroduced.

Of course, extreme cases are rare, and it’s possible, with professional help, to create a restricted diet that successfully supplements missing nutrients. “Diets are very individualised,”

diet due to a false allergy can increase the chance of developing a real allergy later in life, preventing them from acquiring tolerance through natural exposure. A recent paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that children whose parents occasionally fed them peanut snacks in the first year of their lives were 74% less likely to develop an allergy than those whose parents eliminated peanuts from their diets.

There is worry about “free-from” products, too. Frequently marketed as a healthy alternative, they can often be nutritionally inferior to their standard counterparts. Many supermarket gluten-free breads, for example, contain 20 different ingredients, while industrially processed nut or rice milks rely on emulsifiers and stabilisers. Nevertheless, the “free-from” industry is booming and increasingly targeting children. Between 2011 and 2015, the number of gluten-free snack



for tea?

says Norma McGough, the director of policy, research and campaigns at the charity Coeliac UK. “Well-researched restricted diets can be healthy or rounded,” she says, “but you really would not want to restrict your child’s diet without good reason.”

There is also the concern that restricting a child’s

Eating by numbers

- More than 1 in 10 households with children under 12 now avoid gluten.
- In one study, 34% of parents claimed their child suffered an allergy, but formal testing revealed the real figure was 5%.
- In four years, the number of gluten-free snacks launched in the UK aimed at children rose by 150%.
- Children whose parents fed them peanut snacks in their first year of life were 74% less likely to develop an allergy.

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Given the churn of conflicting dietary advice, blogs and targeted marketing, it’s easy to see why confusion arises. A quick online search throws up hundreds of claims about conditions that can, theoretically, be cured by eliminating certain ingredients, or entire food groups, from children’s diets. “The lack of good, qualified dietetic advice has created a vacuum that has allowed local industries to flourish,” Lack says. And with little regulation, the movement shows no sign of slowing down. Instead, scenes that were once joked about — packed lunches accompanied by mini cartons of almond milk and chia-seed flapjacks — have trickled into the mainstream.

So, what’s the answer? The real experts advise against getting caught up in food fads. A plate of meat and two veg may not have the aspirational lure of raw cacao-nib granola or avocado and spirulina ice pops, but what it lacks in fashion-forwardness, it makes up for in nutritional balance. ■