A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

“Krispy Kreme preorders due Friday” is the message that appears on the reader board at the elementary school near my home.

Families walking up our hill to the Little League ballpark on a Saturday morning are already tearing into huge bags of chips and sweets.

Children in that school and children watching baseball, some of them, have to be overweight. Statistics dictate that inevitability. And some of those parents and teachers have to be wailing about the rising obesity levels of our children. Talk is only a beginning. The future of children is not in someone else’s hands — it rests squarely in our own. We cannot rail about a crisis, yet perpetuate old contributing patterns. There is much that we can do if we just pay attention.

ONE — We can help young children notice what they are eating.
When we visited Chef Jack Marcin for our cover story, I was struck by the fact that several of the children really looked at their food: “The plates are beautiful,” observed one child. And as they ate, they made comments about things they liked. Even Max, who spit out his salmon, did so with a look of surprise on his face, but no dramatic comment. We can make the food itself beautiful — and we can take care in its presentation. By doing so, we draw the children in and pique their interest in colors, textures, aromas, and flavors.

TWO — We can create a social experience during mealtimes.
The room was buzzing — children sitting at small tables talking in animated fashion, serving, clearing, enjoying their lunch together. Eating involved checkered tablecloths, flowers, movement, laughter, community — and, apparently, delicious food. The children and teachers in this school in Reggio Emilia, Italy were engaged in conversation — and they were boisterous, loud. Mealtime was an intense social experience for everyone.

THREE — We can engage children in the art of conversation.
When John Baptiste, a guest from Senegal, shared a Thanksgiving with friends years ago, he commented: “You Americans don’t sit at the table and talk. In Senegal we sit together for hours and enjoy the stories.” I’ve tried to remember his words when I feel rushed to get off to the next thing. Children, too, can learn to sit for awhile, relax, and share stories. We can create a context for eating that gives food its place, but extends the enjoyment beyond nutrition. So much is a result of what we expect. If what is happening at the table is fun, the temptation to leave is diminished.

FOUR — We can model the family meal.
It was a priority when our children were growing up to have dinner together. It was a challenge with homework and activities, and we ended up eating at some very odd hours. It has to be even harder now for families to make that commitment. But in early childhood programs, we can model adults and children sitting together, enjoying the same foods, sharing their days. Children can leave a day in child care with an expectation for enjoying food together, the expectation of the family meal.

FIVE — We can involve children in food preparation.
Rich learning is embedded in experiences of cooking together. When young children begin to see what is involved in making fresh bread or peanut butter, they learn science and math; but they also develop ownership of the end product. There is great
self-esteem that comes from eating something warm and delicious that you have created. Understanding the complexity of food can open children to curiosity about where food comes from and what it does for our bodies.

SIX — We can build food memories.
My Auntie Anne will be remembered for saying, “Well, I think it’s time for milk and cookies before bed.” There has to be a place in our lives for a cookie or two and for times when cookies mean “I love you.” Many programs have special treats for special dates or times of the year — and children remember and anticipate the Shamrock shakes and the apple and peanut butter smiles. There are also the vivid experiences of sampling flavors from other families, other cultures — and learning about someone’s grandma or father is part of the memory, too. Connie Nelson, a director in Montana, makes sure the fragrance of bread baking greets children and families every morning — that certainly creates a strong impression. Memories are part of the therapy of comfort foods.

Maybe one of the reasons we are gaining weight is that we aren’t enjoying the experience of eating. We are stuffing our bodies quickly, to satisfy a physical hunger and be on our way. But in doing so we are leaving unsatisfied a great hunger for social connections, for sensory adventures. We are not noticing what we are eating and whom we are eating with. Paying attention has to be at least part of the answer.