

Beware:

Parents a health hazard

Fancy seeing what your child will look like at middle age? You might not like what you see. ***Honey, We're Killing The Kids*** shows Kiwis the frightening future their children will face if they don't change their eating habits now.



Dr Louise Schofield

The biggest health problem facing many Kiwi kids is ... their parents. That's the view of health expert Dr Louise Schofield, who hosts the New Zealand version of the BBC show, ***Honey, We're Killing The Kids***.

And she stresses it's a problem that affects all socio-economic groups.

"Families are having takeaways – two or three times a week is the norm now. Children are going to school with lunches that are just highly processed bags of chips and muesli bars," she says.

"I think women in my position (European, 35, middle class) over-mother in some ways ... We drop them off at school and we're there the second school finishes and we drive them home ... That's as much of a problem as some of the others."

The documentary series gives seven sets of parents the chance to fast forward to their children's

future and see what they will be like in middle age if they continue to live as they are now.

"I had to stand next to them and say 'This is what your child's going to look like at 40' and 'This is why they're going to look like that and essentially a lot of that is driven by you and how you're parenting'," she says. "That was very, very difficult and certainly some of the parents were absolutely mortified."

As the mum of two small boys, Louise was herself shocked by what she discovered while working with the families.

"When I watched the British show I thought, 'There's no way ... we're not that bad.'" However, she's since been proved wrong.

In one of the TV families, the boys were stopping on the way home from school most days for a snack of deep-fried Mars bars and chips. In

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another the seven year old had never eaten a vegetable.

“I said, ‘That’s just not possible’,” says Louise. “(The mother) said ‘He just doesn’t like them’ and I said ‘What do you mean he doesn’t like them? He’s

never had an opportunity (to). You’ve made that choice for him by not continually presenting fresh food and vegetables to him’.”

Then there was the family who knew only one cooking method – frying.

“They didn’t know how to grill, microwave or steam,” recalls Louise.

However, she has nothing but admiration for the parents prepared to take part in the show.

“At the end of each four-week period, we took the families aside ... away from the cameras ... and said ‘Would you do it again?’,” Louise says. “Everyone said ‘Absolutely’. Hopefully they will still say that once they see themselves on TV.”

Particularly as, in most cases, the crew had to first tackle the parents’ relationship before they could help the children, Louise says.

“We found there had been a breakdown, not necessarily in their relationship, but in their communication,” she explains. “They didn’t talk to each other. They hadn’t worked out what sort of parents they wanted to be.”

Louise believes the problems arose because the parents had not learnt good parenting skills from their own mothers and fathers.

“For me it was a real eye-opener because I thought it just came naturally and, of course, it doesn’t,” she says. “In the end we had to work



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with mum and dad separately and get them back on track as a team.”

Only then could the experts start addressing practical problems like “turning off the TV and not having takeaways five nights a week”.

The show also pushes the message that children need to be active.

“Children will be naturally active if you give them the opportunity,” Louise says. “(With) a lot of the families, we’ll go to the house and there’s no sports equipment around. There are no balls, there’s not the cricket set out in the backyard.”

The team provides the family with sportsgear, encourages parents to take kids to the park, to walk them to and from school – and to turn off the television.

“Parents are amazed to find kids like walking to school and don’t miss the TV,” she says. “There is an irony in it, in that it is a television show and one of the main messages is actually turn off the television.”

Story: Kerry Harvey

Honey, We’re Killing The Kids
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