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**AFTER SCHOOL, HUNGRY KIDS ARE
PREY TO MICROWAVE JUNK.
GIVE THEM BETTER CHOICES!**

The Children's Hour

BY JANET ELSE BASU

O

n days when there's a test at school, Sheri Simmons makes herself an omelet for breakfast. One egg, white cheddar cheese and fresh tarragon. "We learned about it in study skills class," she says. "If

you eat an egg before a test, it helps your concentration. I don't know if it works, but it tastes good." ■ Sheri, who just

turned 13, has been cooking for herself for a couple of years now. She's in charge of her own after-school snacks (hot chocolate in winter, frozen yogurt Popsicles in summer) until her parents get home from work. Occasionally she takes over the kitchen and makes something to contribute to dinner. Her current specialty: an onion-sorrel tart. ■ At 13, Michael Hamp

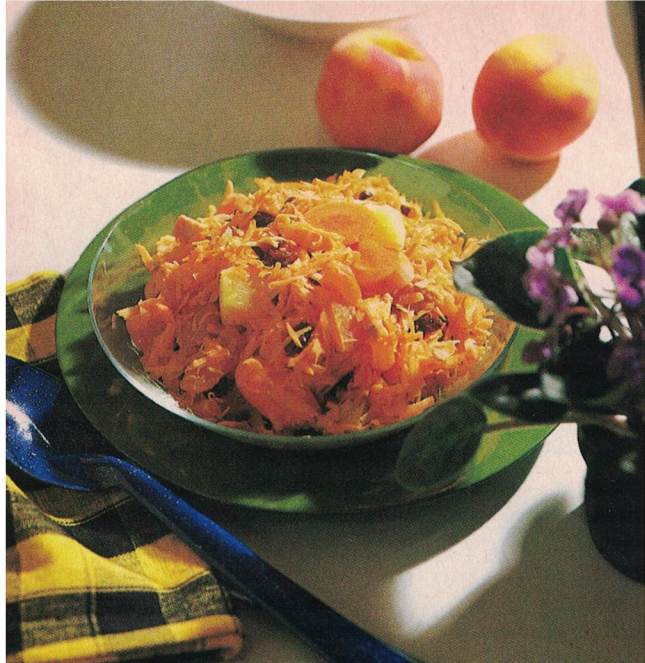
also knows his way around the stove. He rattles off a list of his specialties: "pancakes, French fries, jambalaya, chili, popcorn,

HOME FROM SCHOOL, PARENTS NOT HOME YET, FEELING THIRSTY? IT'S EASY TO MAKE MELON SORBET SODA FOR YOURSELF (RECIPE, P. 83).

cake. . . ." He makes the cake from a mix. His mother taught him to make the jambalaya with tomato sauce, corn, rice, sausage and shrimp—"a

whole handful of shrimp." ■ Michael lives in San Francisco, Sheri in suburban Davis, CA. They're both ahead of many adults in their skill with food—but they're not unusual for their genera-

Photographs by Brian Hagiwara



THE CARROTS ARE ORANGE, THE APRICOTS MORE SUBDUED, BUT THEY ALL TURN VANILLA IN OUR FRUIT AND CARROT TOSS (RECIPE, P. 84).

kids who are preparing their own food represent a revolution in American family life. "It used to be, kids poured their own cold cereal in the morning. Now they can prepare their own oatmeal," reports Watts Wacker of Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, a market research firm in Westport, CT. The difference is the microwave oven. "It's the first heat-generative appliance parents let kids use. It accelerates responsibility."

Other experts wonder whether children are ready for this responsibility. Who's providing the guidance when kids choose their own food? "It can't all be chocolate," says Yvonne Bronner, a nutritionist with the American Dietetic Association. "If kids could make all the right choices, our species wouldn't have evolved parenting."

BUY ME THAT!

Food marketing companies are more than eager to help kids make a choice. *Fortune* magazine estimates that teenagers have almost a \$250 billion impact on the nation's economy. Companies looking for brand loyalty from tomorrow's teens are targeting the younger brothers and sisters of today's teens. These four- to 12-year-olds already make up a pretty good market: They spent \$6.2 billion of their own money in 1988, mostly on snacks, candy and toys.

The typical "buy-me-that" food used to be a candy bar, a sugared cereal or a snack like cookies or chips that you take

right from the package. Now the microwave has added new possibilities, everything from zappable milkshakes to popcorn. The offerings go beyond snacks to foods substantial enough for lunch—pizza, burritos, soup and sandwich combinations. And now four companies have started marketing microwavable dinners specifically for kids, with names like Looney Tunes.

At least one of the new dinners is aimed at parents as much as kids. My Own Meals, of Deerfield, IL, is the brain child of Mary Anne Jackson. She used to pack up a week's worth of home-cooked dinners at a time for the baby sitter to feed her young daughter. Now her company sells five different meals for two- to 10-year-olds in carry-along pouches for busy mothers to take to day care or Grandma's house.

The packets are labeled, "To be prepared by an adult, not by children," because Jackson worries about little kids and hot foods (see "How Safe Is the Microwave for Kids?" p. 80). The meals have been praised by nutritionists for including wholesome ingredients like vegetables and whole grains and for keeping sodium and fat relatively low.

The "Tufts University Diet & Nutrition Letter" recently analyzed three kids' dinners by the percentage of calories derived from fat. According to its calculations, My Own Meals's entrées ranged from 16% to 38%, depending on the product. Tyson's Looney Tunes dinners were 26% to 39%. Kid Cuisine, by ConAgra Frozen Foods, ranged from 7% to 48%. Total calories in these products ranged from 210 to 430.

Nutritionists say children should get 30% to 35% of their daily calories from fat. "Children need this much fat because they're still growing and developing brain tissue, of which fat is a necessary component," says Bronner.

But 48% is too high. A packaged dinner by itself doesn't have to meet this range if breakfast, lunch and snacks also contribute vitamins, minerals and moderate amounts of fat. The concern

comes when kids eat a day-long diet of packaged snacks and meals. "These foods have to be tasty to sell," says Palo Alto dietitian Jo Ann Hattner. "Usually that means extra salt and fat."

It also means the foods most heavily advertised to kids are the ones they should eat the least. Hattner understands how the "buy-me-that" foods get into the house. "Parents sometimes use food to say, 'I know I'm not here, so I bought your favorite food for you,'" she says.

Too much of a favorite food is not the problem for the 2 to 5 million children who suffer serious hunger every month, according to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) in Washington, DC. Nor does it dominate the lives of the millions more who face the threat of hunger on a regular basis.

One-fifth of all children are at risk, living below the federal poverty level. The National Education Association has documented, as if anyone needed to, that when a child is feeling hunger pains, school performance suffers. Long-term learning damage may result from malnu-

Who Are the Latchkey Kids?

How many latchkey kids are there in America? It's estimated that somewhere between 2 and 10 million children under 14 are unsupervised for part of the day, says Michelle Seligson, director of the Wellesley College School-Age Child Care Project. The majority of latchkey kids turn out all right, but they're carrying an extra load of responsibility. And they're missing out on chances for traditional children's activities that build character and creativity—riding bikes, playing games, seeing friends. "The hours school-age children spend outside school are in every way as meaningful as the hours that they spend within it," writes Seligson.

"Too many children are spending too much time worrying about themselves and their safety," says Seligson. "It is unacceptable that parents are making day-to-day arrangements that they do not honestly feel are in their children's best interests." Children regularly left on their own are at greater risk to do poorly in school and fall prey to the wrong kind of peer pressure.