



PRINCETON'S BUSINESS  
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## What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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### **What Does Your ADHD/ADD Kid Eat?**

*by Jamie Saxon*



*Dorothy Mullen*

"If you have a child who has crankiness, mood issues, can't sit still and learn, poor focus, and this child has an intense preference for junk food, it's almost a sure bet that the junk food is having an effect on the child's brain, and needs to be ruled out as a possible or partial cause of ADHD/ADD," says Dorothy Mullen, a Princeton resident and counselor who specializes in substance abuse and addictions counseling.

She speaks on "Food and Mood: Can Changes in the Diet Help Reduce the Symptoms of AD/HD and Coexisting Conditions in Children, Teens, and Adults?" on Wednesday, December 3, at Riverside Elementary

School in Princeton, as part of CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) of Princeton-Mercer County, which meets regularly at the school, offering speakers, panels, and breakout groups.

When it comes to helping parents help their kids make changes “we don’t expect parents to get it right all at once,” says Mullen. “There are many ways you can reduce the harm of the foods your child is addicted to.” Here are some of Mullen’s tips:

Learn the difference between a dessert and a snack. A snack is exactly the same food you would eat at a meal, food that helps your grow, although it might be a smaller portion. A dessert is everything else — chips, soda, candy, cake. “The way this helps parents is they don’t have to vilify their child’s favorite foods. It reduces the bad effect of the food by allowing it but only after a proper meal. You maintain a standard without starting World War III.”

The most important thing you can do for your children is see that they get a good breakfast. “What you eat at the front of the day sets up your blood sugar and mood for the rest of the day. A good breakfast should include some protein, high-quality fat (olive oil and butter are OK), a low-starch vegetable (that means green, as in scrambled eggs with spinach), and whole grain.”

Think you can’t get your kid to eat green eggs and ham? Visit [www.suppersfor.org](http://www.suppersfor.org) for Mullen’s suggestions. (Hint: Mullen says, “There’s good research that shows that if you expose a child to a new food seven times, they can go from yuk to accepting it. So don’t give up, and also don’t be too invested in the child’s eating. If you’re standing over the kid, you’re going to sabotage the process. Also, when they’re hungry is a great time to try new stuff.”)

Do a simple test to see how gaga your kid is over junk food. “Especially for parents with ADD/ ADHD children, I suggest they get a bag of groceries that includes everything from Coke, Red Bull, and chocolate chip cookies through prepared food through to the opposite end with fresh fruit and vegetables and whole foods. Ask the child to put them in order of what they would eat if mommy and daddy weren’t watching. If they have a child who intensely prefers to have the Coke

and cookie end, and the parents would have to bargain to get them to eat at the other end, then absolutely the role of food has to be ruled out as a possible cause of brain differences or mood issues." (Mullen is going to explain this tactic further at the December 3 workshop.)

Exercise control in the grocery store without the kid there, not in the house. Mullen says that if a child will only eat junk food, then the parent is addicted too. Only bring food into the house you're willing to let your child eat.

Remember you're their parent, not their friend. "We need to seize back the power of parenting and not worry about our popularity with them. We're not doing them any favors by indulging them when it comes to addictive substances, i.e. junk food, that alter their brains."

Get children involved in preparing, even growing, their own food. "The more you involve children in the growing, harvesting, preparing of food, and properly dining on the food, the more likely they are to be willing to eat healthy food," says Mullen. Since 2001 Mullen has worked to create school gardens at Riverside Elementary School, designing, installing, and maintaining outdoor classrooms, providing teacher workshops and consulting with the Princeton Regional School District on incorporating wellness programs into the science curriculum.

Mullen herself learned the hard way about the devastating effects a poor diet can have on brain function and mental, not just physical, health. Twenty-five years ago, in her late 20s, after the birth of her first child, she says suffered from "insoluble health problems including a psychiatric hospitalization for a month for what turned out years later to an undiagnosed medical problem — suicidal depression," says Mullen, who grew up in Wyckoff in Bergen County, the daughter of two high school teachers. Her doctors couldn't diagnose her problem through lab tests, so they assumed that she was a psychiatric case. "That's where the energy for all my subsequent work came from," she says. She later learned that during that period, and for a period after her second child was born, she suffered from post-partum depression but it was never diagnosed.

After numerous kinds of medical treatment Mullen decided

conventional medicine was not going to help her. She began to read about alternative medicine and over a period of two and half years weaned herself off depression drugs. She also discovered Robert Atkins's radio show. Atkins, a cardiologist by training, specialized in issues related to blood sugar, and is now known of course for his famous Atkins diet designed to stabilize blood sugar. Mullen went into Manhattan to be treated by Atkins, who put her on a strict diet, had her keep a food journal, and started her on nutritional supplements. "Within a couple of weeks I was out of the depression," she says.

Today, she says, "I personally have to eat to normalize my mood and my blood sugar. If I ate the standard American diet, I probably would have committed suicide by now."

While earning her bachelors with a double major in German and Swedish translation from Upsala College in East Orange, which is now closed, she would come to Princeton to do research for her schoolwork at Firestone Library, which at that time still had open stacks. She moved here right after graduating in 1977. She went back to school a year and half ago, earning her masters in counselor education from the College of New Jersey in 2007. She says she got her masters because "I wanted to understand problems with the healthcare system from inside a discipline that deals with mental health issues. I did not intend to become a counselor. I knew that I was supposed to do something about this problem. I just didn't know what it was. Midway through I realized that what I had to do was create a nonprofit organization that provided people with blood sugar regulation issues the same level of support that alcoholics get from AA, and that it should be free to users."

Her nonprofit took the form of a program called Suppers, learn-by-doing "table-based" support groups whose members meet weekly or monthly to share a whole foods meal and learn about diet and lifestyle changes to stabilize blood sugar and mood chemistry. The program focuses on something called Nutritional Harm Reduction, which helps people make changes in manageable steps. Most of the meetings take place in Mullen's home — there has to be a kitchen — and she is training the first crop of mentors and facilitators to hold meetings in their homes. She has also held meetings at AAMH on Alexander Road.

The Suppers program, which is still in its pilot stages, provides meetings for families with a member who has ADHD/ADD, and there are also Suppers meetings for those with depression, anxiety, obesity, learning issues, diabetes, or problems with alcohol. The common thread is the strongly overlapping problems of blood sugar regulation and mood chemistry. The only cost is the price of one's own groceries. "I chose to serve this population based on the research of the deceased Carl Pfeiffer, the brilliant physician who ran the Princeton Brain Bio Center [in Skillman]," says Mullen.

Mullen, who volunteered for a time for Atkins' Foundation for the Advancement of Innovative Medicine, is convinced poor diet not only contributes to diabetes but also to ADD/ADHD. "Atkins's prediction 30 years ago that we were creating a nation of diabetics is coming true. Witness the CDC prediction that one of three Americans will become diabetic in their lifetimes and at younger and younger ages if we don't turn it around. The very early signs of children who are likely to be headed for Type II diabetes are not medical; they include learning issues, mood problems, and behavioral issues."

The Suppers program is currently being funded in part by donations from grateful members whose health and lives have been improved by the program. But ultimately, once the program design is completed, Mullen plans to go after grant money because, as she puts it, "commercial messages are not allowed at meetings as the entire focus is on learning how to lead a healthier life."

She is in the process of collecting and cataloguing success stories. "When I have about 60 to 70 success stories of people who are off their meds, losing weight, with no migraines, then I can say, 'this program works, here's a profile of how it works.'" With her two grown sons, ages 25 and 20, out of the house and in college, respectively, and her daughter, 15, in boarding school, Mullen, who is divorced, devotes herself fulltime to the Suppers program. She also gives workshops and lectures on school gardening, environmental education, nutritional harm reduction, and blood sugar and mood chemistry.

"There's a natural connection between the school gardening project and the Suppers. I feel that I am serving the same population, separated by a number of years," says Mullen. "Because children don't

grow up closer to nature and closer to food sources, the natural consequence of that is a diabetic, anxious, depressed adult population.”

Attention Deficit Disorder Lecture and Discussion, Riverside School, 58 Riverside Drive, Princeton. Wednesday, December 3, 7 p.m. “Food and Mood: Can Changes in the Diet Help Reduce the Symptoms of AD/HD and Coexisting Conditions in Children, Teens, and Adults?” presented by Dorothy Mullen. Sponsored by CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) of Princeton Mercer County, [www.chadd.net](http://www.chadd.net). For more information on Mullen visit [www.dorothymullen.org](http://www.dorothymullen.org) or [www.suppersfor.org](http://www.suppersfor.org). 609-683-8787.