

# Social Marketing Campaigns for Healthier Eating Habits in France: VIF and “LES BONNES PORTIONS” (The Right Portions) Campaign Against Childhood Obesity

# 14

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## Chapter Overview

“Les Bonnes Portions” campaign, meaning “the Right Portions,” addresses children’s eating patterns as a whole and is part of the program «Vivons en forme» (meaning: “let’s be fit and healthy!”) or VIF®. This program is driven by FLVS, a non-profit organization which for more than 10 years has proposed preventive health programs targeting French children, following the former EPODE program.

This campaign has a specific focus on the portion sizes theme: which portion for which child, regarding his/her age? And which portions of the different ingredients of a diet? Its main behavioral objectives are:

For the school-meal staff: to help them give the right portion in accordance with nutritional recommendation linked to the child’s age.

For the children of elementary school: to raise their good practices regarding treats such as candies, sugary drinks, and chips, however adding also emotional and sensory enjoyment experiences, and offering mindful eating apprenticeship.

For children and their families: to adopt servings to the child’s needs—especially on meat, fries—and including all kinds of treats.

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It consists in forming professional actors (canteen staff and extracurricular staff) at a local level to support changing the behaviors of canteen staff, children, and families regarding food portion sizes and treats. The campaign is still ongoing, but some positive partial results are provided, such as the food waste in school canteens in Saint André-Lez-Lille, one of the first towns to adopt the campaign, which has halved, suggesting that children are receiving servings that are more adapted to their needs.

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## Campaign Background

A 2015 survey on 8124 French 5th grade students revealed that 18% of them were overweight and almost 4% obese (DREES, 2015). However, the proportion largely depends on the children's social origins: Working-class children are overweight or obese (22 and 6% respectively) significantly more often than those of management-level employees (13 and 1% respectively). Moreover, children from higher-income households develop life habits that are more conducive to a healthy life. Forty-two percent of them say they eat vegetables every day (27% among working-class children), and 15% say they consume sugar-sweetened beverages (26% among working-class children). Almost 8 out of 10 engage in a sporting activity, against only 67% of working-class children. Fewer children of management-level employees spend more than 2 h in front of screens on school days (8% compared to 16%).

These dramatic social differences go hand in hand with geographical specificities. From 2007 to 2013, national surveys on students in different grades (kindergarten, 5th grade, and 9th grade) showed that the prevalence of overweight and obese children is higher in northern and eastern France (DREES, 2015). These are former mining areas with an outdated steel industry and high rates of low-income households and unemployment.

“Vivons en forme” or VIF<sup>®</sup> (“Let’s live healthily”) is a non-profit organization (NPO) which for more than 10 years has proposed preventive health programs targeting French children. Its main objective is to promote health and well-being by focusing (1) on the prevention of childhood obesity and overweight and (2) on social inequalities regarding food intake and physical activities. VIF has designed a unique methodology with the active involvement of a now national network of 252 towns. It promotes better eating and physical activity among children and families through various campaigns and tools targeting local communities and needs. Each campaign aims to provide concrete solutions to towns and facilitate the commitment of local stakeholders. When a partner town decides to join the campaign, a local VIF manager is put in charge of meeting locals to tailor the planned actions to the community’s needs. All VIF interventions and tools are developed with the help of a partner, LinkUp, an independent French company specialized in social marketing and public health campaigns. Since 2016, VIF has delivered the

“LES BONNES PORTIONS” campaign to address the issue of portions served to children at home and in school canteens, which all too often fail to take the children’s actual needs into account. Research has suggested that portion sizes have an effect on food intake (Ebeling et al., 2002; Robinson et al., 2016), especially for children over 5 (Rolls, Roe, Kral, Meengs, & Wall, 2004). The WHO recommends limiting portion sizes to reduce the risk of children becoming overweight or obese (WHO, 2014).

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## **SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats)**

### **Strengths**

– VIF is currently active in 252 French towns, mainly in poor areas. 97% of VIF towns are situated in zones with high obesity and social inequalities regarding health.

VIF has already affected 4 million people, mainly families and children.

VIF is now an experienced partner (more than 10 years).

VIF and LinkUp base their campaigns on strong and lasting principles.

- Non-stigmatization of people, behavior, or food.
- Targeting the most vulnerable families to avoid their withdrawal from their local communities.
- Taking into account the “modern way of eating”: convenience and quick meal preparation and cooking.
- A positive, progressive, and tangible approach focused on the emotional pleasure of eating, physical activity, and sharing.
- Strengthening social links and sharing to promote sustainable health.

Every new VIF program includes a living laboratory phase to improve and validate the chosen approach and tool content.

VIF has achieved encouraging figures showing a specific impact on more deprived families.

The network of towns is still on board after 10 years, developing a unique step-by-step strategy.

### **Weaknesses**

In France, social marketing is very underdeveloped and VIF has to convince new partner towns of the appeal of tackling local issues related to children’s health.

Methodological difficulties in setting up a recognized scientific assessment of the VIF program’s efficiency.

Due to its local embeddedness, VIF has to gather ongoing assessment data for greater recognition as a major stakeholder in preventive actions against childhood overweight and obesity in France.

## **Opportunities**

VIF is attracting growing interest from local and national public authorities. Knowledge about healthy diets has increased, even though there has been little behavioral change.

Although a general knowledge about healthy diets has increased, probably thanks to public information campaigns, only little behavioral changes have been observed, especially in deprived areas.

There is a new vision at the French Health Ministry to consider social marketing as a valuable tool to change behavior.

The obesity epidemic is (sadly) worsening among children in lower socioeconomic classes.

Enrollment of youths as a lever to change families' eating habits.

## **Threats**

Private partnership may be criticized in French culture, although public grants are decreasing. This can lead to a lack of credibility among academics and public decision makers, even though public–private partnerships (PPPs) are governed by a strict charter made public.

Resistance to change from certain parts of the population, especially economically and culturally disadvantaged people.

Difficulties identifying legitimate local supporters (called “ambassadors” by VIF). Difficulties financing the process needed to define the right messages to support behavioral change.

Development of local social marketing programs is dependent on partnerships with towns and public subsidies.

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## **Past and Similar Efforts**

At a national level, since 2001, the French National Nutrition and Health Program (PNNS) has issued recommendations to increase healthier eating. Specific recommendations were made for children, although most campaigns have been generic and educational such as the French version of the “5 a Day” campaign (“manger 5 fruits et légumes par jour”). A significant general improvement has not yet been observed in terms of decreasing childhood overweight and obesity, even though there is increasing awareness of the PNNS recommendations.

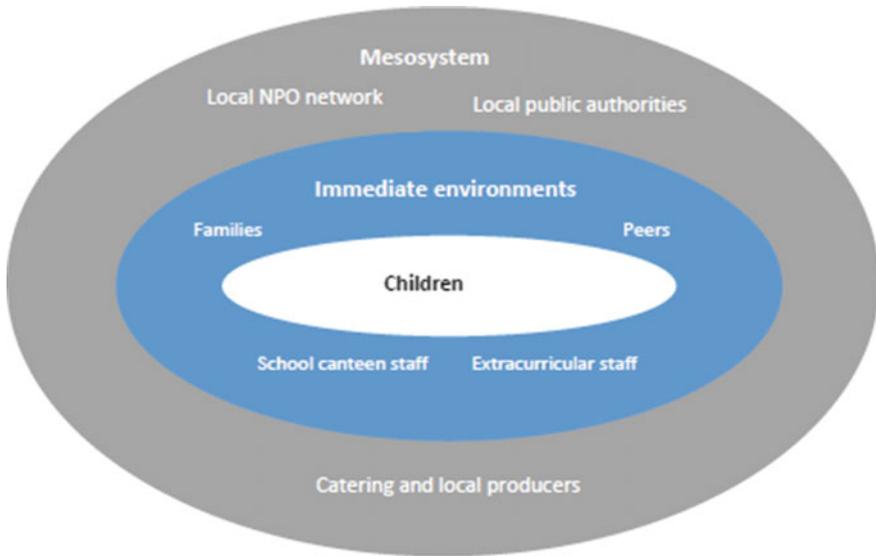
Taking into account the dramatic data on social inequalities regarding childhood overweight and obesity, VIF's objectives focus on deploying local actions with a decisive impact on the habits of disadvantaged population segments. Since expanding knowledge of food guidelines has not been sufficient to change eating behavior, VIF and LinkUp decided to design and implement community-based actions. The first step was to investigate the lifestyles and motivations which cause certain disadvantaged families to adopt the usual behaviors that lead to childhood overweight and obesity. For example, VIF has already developed the following action themes to foster healthy eating literacy and sports activities: 60 min of extracurricular physical activity "BOUGE AVEC LES ZACTIFS" (keep busy and active), using fun to tackle low levels of activity among the most vulnerable children; and "UN FRUIT POUR LA RECRE" (fruit at recess) to encourage every child to enjoy a piece of fruit during the break at school, a change in the habits of the poorest children. In 2016, VIF designed its next campaign, "LES BONNES PORTIONS" ("the right portions"), to address the issue of serving portion sizes that are adapted to children's needs.

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### **LES BONNES PORTIONS Target Audience**

The social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Stokols, 1996) provides a framework to analyze four types of nested environmental systems of influence: (1) immediate environments such as home, school, or peers; (2) the systems connecting these immediate environments; (3) external environmental settings with indirect influences; and (4) the wider cultural context. A key element of VIF is to target not only children but also their immediate environments such as the people who care for them, which includes families as a whole, canteen staff, and extracurricular facilitators. In France, breakfast and dinner are usually eaten as a family, and children's plates are served by an adult who can control the portion size. Pupils who have their lunch every day in a canteen eat a complete meal including 4 compulsory courses (starter and main course, dairy product or cheese, and dessert) 5 times a week. School canteen staff (generally women often called "canteen aunties") belong to the same community as children and parents and share their motivations and values regarding the food served to children.

VIF first conducted qualitative research (interviews and focus groups with adults from immediate environments) to understand food habits and motivations and barriers to changing them. The data collected were consistent with the 2015 national study by DREES: Poor children were eating fewer vegetables than other children, had poor levels of physical activity, and spent a lot of time in front of screens. A gap in portion sizes was also observed, with the usual serving in deprived families often bigger than in more affluent households. Indeed, most disadvantaged parents displayed a lack of knowledge about the right portion sizes and food types to serve to their children. This confusion was connected with the gap observed between "5 a day" recommendations and the food habits of families: Big portions of



**Fig. 14.1** VIF's social ecological model of community-based campaigns in the most deprived areas

minced meat, nuggets, French fries, and unchecked treats are served by parents keen to ensure their children are fed and satisfied. Some parents were found to be intent on ensuring their children eat enough food to compensate for the other more expensive purchases which they must limit due to their low income levels. Moreover, working-class families perpetuate a cultural tradition of high-density meals needed for demanding physical jobs, even when they face unemployment. Combined, these factors lead to confusion, with a lot of parents calling for help to assess whether their children ate well, too much, or not enough.

The “canteen aunties” revealed the same lack of knowledge when it came to adapting children’s portion sizes to their specific needs. In addition, the research showed that children registered at an after-school center, which is often the case in low-income families, spend 20 h per week with staff members in these facilities. Extracurricular facilitators and canteen staff ultimately control the child’s physical environment, including their activity levels and what they eat. It is important to involve them in the campaign (Fig. 14.1).

After analyzing the data, the targets of the “LES BONNES PORTIONS” campaign can be defined on two levels:

Immediate environmental actors, such as staff in canteens and after-school centers, are VIF’s primary target to make them active partners in delivering the right message to children and their families and adopting new habits in relation to portion sizes.

Children and their families are the final target, with the objective of promoting healthier food habits. In order not to stigmatize disadvantaged families, all children attending elementary school (6–11 years old) are targeted, including those who already get the right portions at home.

On a wider level, the mesosystem which includes other local influential stakeholders (network of NPOs, catering, local producers, and local public authorities) was involved to support the project, although this part of the campaign will not be described in this chapter.

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## Campaign Objectives

To be as efficient as possible, VIF adopted a “small paces” approach, and its partner towns chose to be involved in annual thematic initiatives such as “LES BONNES PORTIONS.” Each campaign has a specific objective.

LES BONNES PORTIONS campaign focuses on portion sizes: (1) serve suitable portions for every child and (2) serve balanced portions of the different ingredients that make up their diet.

## Behavioral Objectives

For canteen staff: Serve the right portions in accordance with nutritional recommendations linked to each child’s age.

For extracurricular facilitators: Adopt new behavioral norms when giving sweets to the children and use the kit tools that provide emotional and sensory enjoyment while adding an educational approach.

For children and their families: Adapt servings to the child’s needs, including treats.

## Belief and Knowledge Objectives

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) holds that the perception of our self-efficacy is crucial and determines how we feel and think about ourselves and how we behave. According to Bandura, people’s self-beliefs are more likely to influence what they do than their actual skills and competencies. Indeed, the qualitative field data suggest low levels of self-belief among canteen employees. They are not at all considered—and do not consider themselves—as skilled individuals. The campaign aims to strengthen their self-efficacy regarding food portions as they become aware of the importance of this issue and feel they have the skills to address it. Parents feel these staff members can act as partners rather than unqualified waiters, as professionals who can enjoy the knowledge that they are serving children the right portions. Facilitators often serve as role models for children. Providing appropriate cues on when to treat children helps them feel

confident and benevolent. They can introduce new social norms on treats by helping children to choose their own portion sizes.

Some parents have asked for easy guidance to indicate whether they are serving proper meals to their children. Raising awareness of new norms on portions of various food types which are adapted to the child's age is not simply an educational aim. The ultimate objective is to give parents helpful references and improve their food literacy in order to increase feelings of self-efficacy, a crucial factor in effecting behavioral change. As for children, the objectives underpinning fun food initiatives and sensory games are to help them feel more autonomous and actively reflect on their choices and to increase their food literacy.

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## **Barriers, Benefits, and Competition**

Both targets and local stakeholders were included in a participative process designed to identify barriers and motivations for change. Barriers have already been discussed above: The psychological need of parents and school staff to ensure children are eating enough suffers from a lack of knowledge about portions that are adapted to each child's age. Cultural and geographical habits reinforce these barriers, especially among disadvantaged people.

Benefits are mainly psychological in the short term (higher perceived self-efficacy) because without raising the self-efficacy of stakeholders, the behavioral benefits cannot be attained. The health benefits for children are strongly connected to healthier food and adapted portions, although research has shown that health is not a core value for impoverished people (Reckinger and Régnier, 2017), which can be a strong barrier to behavioral change.

Competition is really hard considering that eating habits are often mindless activities and embedded in social, psychological, and cultural factors. This is why VIF interventions seek to influence environmental triggers and behavioral prompts rather than behaviors themselves, as recommended by French and Gordon (2015). Giving children excessive portions of meat, French fries, or candy is an indulgent way to feel generous with long-term negative consequences for their health. Campaigns must also challenge the appeal for children of fatty and sweet treats by helping them to feel more autonomous and actively reflect on their food choices, albeit within the limitations inherent in each child's development stage. Eventually, it is important to change the social norm for the right portion sizes for caregivers and children.

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## **Positioning**

VIF seeks to be considered by the primary target (canteen staff and extracurricular facilitators) as a long-term local partner rather than as an outside agency interfering in their habits and judging them negatively. The relationship between local VIF managers and locally identified ambassadors is thus paramount. When VIF is seen

as a partner by the professionals, they feel more confident and have a growing sense of self-efficacy, which allows for the stigma-free spread of new norms to the final targets: the most vulnerable children and families. Primary and final targets really need to feel nudged by VIF as a local partner that is close to their community, without any negative or formative judgement.

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## Research

When developing the campaign approach, VIF and LinkUp always start with a research phase that includes a systematic literature review involving academics and qualitative research to determine their target audiences with greater efficiency. Both targets and local stakeholders are included in a participative process aimed at identifying barriers and motivations for change. This process involves the joint creation of the next campaign, in order to involve everyone in achieving the campaign objectives. Next, the living laboratory process is a decisive step for real-world testing, thereby making it possible to optimize the set of tools, the efficiency of the training sessions, and the experiences on offer. An assessment device measures the capacity of the proposed tools to mobilize and involve local stakeholders, who then become campaign “ambassadors,” and to reach out to the final target. This is an essential step in ensuring the relevance of the campaign and the overall design.

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## Marketing Strategy

### Product

Training workshops are first proposed by the local VIF manager to the primary targets in order to give them an understanding of appropriate servings and the correct behaviors when treating children with candy or other kinds of treats. The “local ambassadors,” i.e., local stakeholders who work closely with the local population and can support the preventive campaign, are identified through these workshops and then sign on for long-term communication efforts involving key messages after the training period. Facilitators are invited to use the kit tools to raise awareness and children’s autonomy, and then to distribute educational flyers to bring home to their parents, with easy and funny guidance on adapted and balanced portion sizes. None of these actions can really be monitored, so VIF has to help its targets to adopt the desired behaviors.

### Price

The campaign must challenge indulgence and the habit of serving excessive and unchecked portions with tangible, fun, and helpful techniques that can easily be

implemented to make healthier portions a norm that is shared in the children's immediate environments.

## Place Strategies

A key place strategy is to establish regular, high exposure for the recommended portion practices. It is therefore essential to be present with posters in school canteens when meals are being served, and to remind staff what they learned during the training workshops. Extracurricular activities (in France, these last between 3 and 5 h every day) are also a key opportunity to reach children collectively (within peer groups) in an enjoyable and dynamic way.

## Promotion Strategies

VIF and its communication agency designed specific leaflets aimed at reaching out to the primary and final targets. These offer practical and easy solutions to cope with perceived difficulties.

For canteen staff, wall posters act as reminders of the importance of serving age-adapted portions (Fig. 14.2). Two examples are given, one for a preschool meal and the other for an elementary school meal, since canteens often provide meals to both groups. Both show a regular meal for children (burger and French fries) rather than an "ideal" meal which could hinder its acceptance by the staff.

Posters targeting children are also designed for after-school centers to help them adopt healthier attitudes toward fatty and sweet food and counter its appeal. The

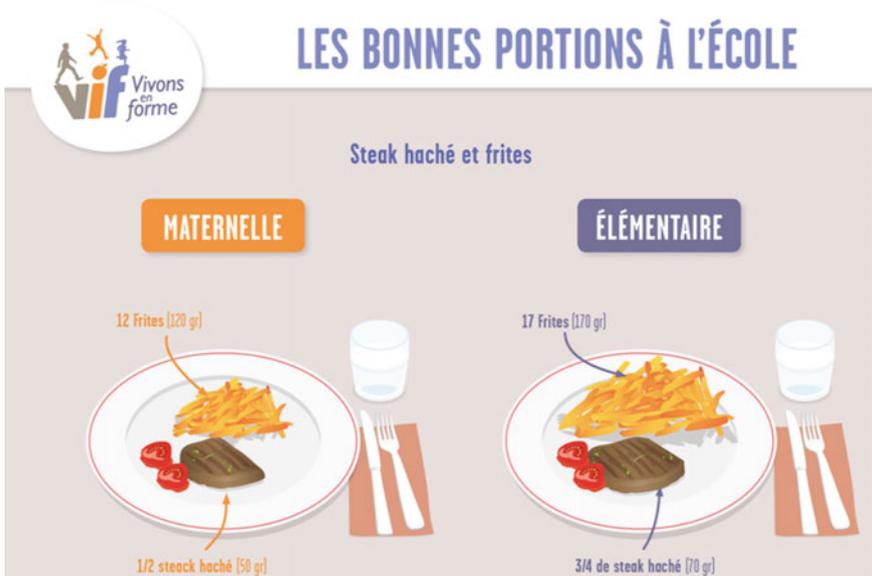


Fig. 14.2 Poster for canteen staff. Courtesy of VIF and LinkUp



Fig. 14.3 Poster for children at an after-school center. Courtesy Of VIF and LinkUp

message is very easy to understand, does not generate guilt, and is a light-hearted way to evaluate the right quantity by using the child’s own hand. It helps children feel more autonomous (Fig. 14.3).

“For me, candy, chocolate, sweets, and salty treats.

Once in a while. Examples of suitable occasions are given, such as on Wednesday afternoon (free afternoon for kids), at a birthday party, or after physical activity.

Preferably during the afternoon snack to avoid eating between meals.

In small quantities. The poster suggests an easy and fun way to measure portion sizes: You can eat treats the size of your closed fist.

With mindfulness. To savor the treat, rather than eat it while doing something else, such as playing video games, will give you more pleasure.”

Leaflets can also be distributed to families through their children to reassure parents about the proper portions.

The leaflets are easy to understand, address situations that parents encounter and have to deal with (portions of chips, chocolate, or soft drinks), and explain why they need to be careful about quantities and frequency. These are key elements for improving parents’ food literacy and self-efficacy (Fig. 14.4).

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## Program Evaluation

No specific scientific evaluation of the EATING PATTERNS campaign has yet been made available since it started in 2016, and not all of the towns involved began at the same time. However, the food waste in school canteens in Saint André-lez-Lille, one of the first towns to become involved in the campaign, has halved, suggesting that children are receiving food portions that are more adapted to their needs.

Overall figures are available for VIF’s preventive actions.

Growth of the network of towns involved (Fig. 14.5).

Assessment of the quality of the involvement of participating towns: 48% say they are highly committed to VIF’s actions.

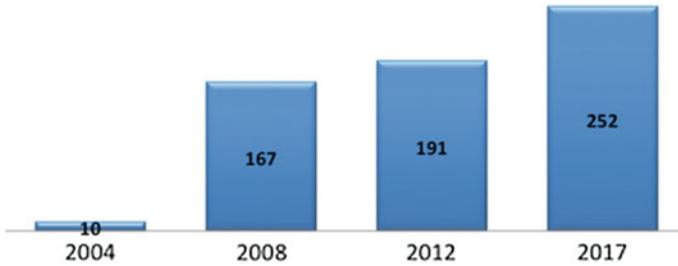
600–700 initiatives are implemented each year throughout the network of towns, reaching a total of 78,000 children aged 3–12.

Significant results on obesity and overweight prevalence, including in more deprived areas (figures for children aged 6–11 in six towns with deprived neighborhoods):

Saint André-lez-Lille	–40.5% in 7 years
Saint Quentin	–6.6% in 8 years
Vitré	–17% in 11 years
Meyzieu	–48% in 11 years
Royan	–40% in 10 years
Douchy-les-Mines	–13% in 8 years



**Fig. 14.4** Leaflets for parents. “Does my child eat well, too much, or not enough?” This is a question shared by many parents. *Courtesy of VIF and LinkUp*



**Fig. 14.5** Number of VIF's partner towns from 2004 to 2017

These measures have been selected because of the quality of the process—led at school by school nurses—and because of its integrity throughout the periods concerned. Many other towns have assessed the impact on childhood obesity, but the measures have not been selected so far because of lack of coherence in age or the numbers of children being weighed and measured.

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## Discussion and Lessons Learned

The living laboratory—which tested the key messages, training sessions, and tools in real life in two pilot towns—showed that facilitators found the first kit tools too complicated and informational. They did not want to become experts on nutrition and were afraid to redesign the after-school period as a teaching period focused on balanced diet. New kit tools were therefore developed as a more entertaining and interactive way to meet their expectations. The test also revealed the importance of taking into account the kinds of dishes actually served such as minced meat and French fries and not only broccoli and carrots. The living laboratory real-world testing, although time-consuming and very demanding in terms of organization and budget, has, over time revealed the weakness of the designed roadmaps and tools, making it possible to address the failures and fine-tune the empowerment strategy. Where implemented, the ongoing campaign is very much welcomed by local canteen and after-school staff. “LES BONNES PORTIONS” is capitalizing on the role that local immediate environments such as people in canteens and after-school centers can play to change food habits. Peer-group dynamics, tangible nudges, and appealing reminder devices are based on the specification of behavioral and psychological sources of value. They provide opportunities for value creation with primary and final targets and the empowerment of local communities, in order to target the most vulnerable families within their social network. The growing demand of towns to join the VIF network shows that it is meeting communities’

expectations in the fight against childhood overweight and obesity. It would nevertheless be interesting to examine the long-lasting efficacy of the campaign in terms of developing a new social norm on the right portion sizes for children.

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you have suggestions to strengthen the preventive actions aimed at the primary and final targets?
2. What other factors might affect obesity and food choice?
3. How else might food portions and food choice be targeted?
4. How can the influential environments be analyzed using a social ecological approach? How can it be adapted to your local scale?
5. What other health problems related to poverty and the social environment of children can VIF address in its next annual thematic campaign? In line with exchange theory, how can value be jointly created to change the behaviors that lead to negative health outcomes?

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