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How to Feed a Kid: A Parent's Guide to Unraveling the Phenomenon of Picky Eating

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Degree to be awarded: MPH

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MS. Ed University of Kansas 2016

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Public Health in
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2020

Abstract

How to Feed a Kid: A Parent's Guide to Unravelling the Phenomenon of Picky Eating

By Asata S. Reid, MS Ed.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau there are almost 35 million families with their own children (biological and adopted) under 18 years old (U.S. Census, 2019). So you are in good company when your kids ask you, "What's for dinner?" and you get that deer-in-the-headlights look, or roll your eyes toward the back of your skull, or just pick up the phone and order pizza... again. The rolling tide of dinner is never ceasing, it happens every single night, and as a parent it falls into your lap to make it happen.

Feeding kids should be simple, and at this guide's core premise, it is: make nutritious meals and provide them at regular feeding times. But there are hidden forces at work that make this task harder than it should be. I have been cooking with kids professionally for a decade now and from my experience, here are the big three boogeymen standing between parents, kids and happy mealtimes.

1. Lack of self-efficacy regarding feeding oneself experienced by parents AND children
2. The rise of the "phenomenon of the picky eater" over the 20th century
3. Aggressive marketing and the effect of media consumption

Parents need skills to navigate the barriers, behaviors and attitudes that produce picky eating behaviors in children. This requires an intervention strategy that defines and recenters picky eating as a phenomenon that can be remediated by enhanced self-awareness and self-efficacy in making healthy food choices as a lifestyle by both parents and children, while bolstering families' defenses against aggressive food marketing and media overconsumption.

This special thesis project is designed to help parents and caregivers examine the personal, cultural, and environmental influences affecting the food choices that both adults and children make. This project provides: 1) research to help parents better understand the behaviors that shape children's eating habits; 2) a theoretical framework to empower lasting behavioral change in parents and children; and 3) a guide to help parents navigate specific situations that present as barriers when feeding children.



EMORY

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I have to thank the kids from all of my classes. I learned from and with you. "Feeding a kid" is my specialty because of what each of you brought to the classroom. Thanks for being open, honest and for cooking and eating with me. To my fellow foot soldiers in the battle to feed kids and families, I salute you. Iron sharpens iron, and we are here today because of our collective efforts to make the world a better place. Lindsey Luczynski, Erin Croom Kirkpatrick, Wande Okunoren-Meadows, Tasha Gomes, Abbie King, Kimberly Della Donna, Tammy Reasoner.

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Finally I dedicate this guide to you, the parent reading this guide, because you care. That's why you picked this up hoping to learn something to help you on your parenting journey. No parent has "extra" time to read a book, so if you're looking through these pages, it is because in your heart of hearts you want what's best for your children. You're doing a great job.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the U.S. Census Bureau there are almost 35 million families with their own children (biological and adopted) under 18 years old (U.S. Census, 2019). So you are in good company when your kids ask you, “What’s for dinner?” and you get that deer-in-the headlights look, or roll your eyes toward the back of your skull, or just pick up the phone and order pizza... again. The rolling tide of dinner is never ceasing, it happens every single night, and as a parent it falls into your lap to make it happen.

Feeding kids should be simple, and at this guide’s core premise, it is: make nutritious meals and provide them at regular feeding times. But there are hidden forces at work that make this task harder than it should be. I have been cooking with kids professionally for a decade now and from my experience, here are the big three boogeymen standing between parents, kids and happy mealtimes.

4. Lack of self-efficacy regarding feeding oneself experienced by parents AND children
5. The rise of the “phenomenon of the picky eater” over the 20th century
6. Aggressive marketing and the effect of media consumption

Simply put, parents and caregivers have an idea of what healthy meals are supposed to look like. Intellectually, even very young children understand that fruits and vegetables are considered healthy, while candy and soda are not. However there is a breakdown that happens between what we are supposed to eat and what we actually do eat. And it happens for a number of reasons. If we take food scarcity out of the equation and focus on families who have regular access to a range of food choices, we can identify some pretty simple motivations behind people's food choices:

1. It tastes good (I like it = I feel GOOD)
2. I can get it (affordable + available = EASY)
3. I can feed myself/prepare it confidently (I am successful = REWARD)

Notice none of that mentions "healthy" or "nutritious." That's because we're dealing with some primal stuff here. Food makes us feel good, food is necessary for life, food often feels like a reward for just showing up in life. And all of that happens at a very basic level. Your dog probably thinks of food this same way. But as people, we're burdened with knowing more than our furry friends, so nutrition *should* be a part of this scenario, and we *should* do things that are good for us and keep us healthy. In a perfect situation, not only *should* we feed ourselves life-sustaining nourishing foods, but we actually *would*.

When you look at a balanced diet it has a lot more plant matter in it than the Standard American Diet (the acronym SAD kind of says it all), and unfortunately most Americans just aren't that

well versed in preparing vegetables and fruits in ways that are delicious or that they've been *culturalized* to eat. That is important to note. For example, the American Southeast is the land of the "Meat and Three plate," and the "Three" on the plate are usually starchy, carb-heavy items smothered in cheese (macaroni and cheese) or deep fried (french fries), or some poor plant that's been boiled beyond recognition (green beans) or smothered in cheese (cheese on broccoli) or deep fried (fried okra). So if we are introducing foods that many people have been brought up to believe (culturalized) aren't as tasty as the traditional Meat and Three items, *and* we are insisting that adults with low skill level and interest in preparing these foods do so, then we can expect a low success rate not only in these adults feeding themselves, but also we can expect an even lower success rate in them feeding their children these foods. Compared to the motivations behind making food choices above, these new food choices look like:

1. It doesn't taste as good (I don't like it = I DON'T feel good)
2. I have to seek it out (I have to think about it/figure out how to cook it = NOT easy)
3. I don't want it and neither do my kids (I am failing = PUNISHMENT)

Yikes! All of that goes into serving spinach instead of mac and cheese? Yes, and these feelings compound exponentially by the number of people you attempt to feed that push away their plates or turn their noses up when you serve a meal. Repeat that night after night and it is easy to see why parents give up. It doesn't feel good to serve food to an unenthusiastic, unreceptive audience food they may not want, especially when you have to put mental and physical effort into it and then get served a big helping of ingratitude for all your work. Waste of time, waste of food, waste of money. No one is winning at that dinner table.

Besides your own internal struggle, there are external forces at work here too. The “phenomenon of the picky eater” is something that struck the American upper class in the early 1900s and has grown into a behavior challenge worthy of scientific study. (Traiger, 2019) Pickiness is so pervasive that it is one of the most common complaints parents have about their children with as many as 50% of the parents of preschoolers describing their child as picky. (Emmett et al., 2018; Wolstenholme et al., 2020). For something with such a wide spread, it is still largely undefined, and many parents fear physical and mental health harm to their kids. (Steinsbekk et al., 2017; Wolstenholme et al., 2020) So we have parents who feel ill-equipped to healthfully feed themselves and their families, now charged with the fear that they are responsible for potential harm to their children due to their children’s picky eating behaviors. That’s a lot of pressure to bring to Taco Tuesday. No wonder mealtime struggles go off like a bomb!

Another external force to contend with is it’s “Parent vs. The World” when it comes to food choices. Adults and children are attacked by a barrage of food messages all day long. From billboards and subway signage, to TV and internet commercials, from star athletes and Disney princesses, to flyers in the mail and vending machines in the hallway... you cannot escape food messaging in America. It is everywhere. (Smith et al., 2019, Elliot and Truman, 2020, Binder et al., 2020) And every view, listen, like or swipe is saying something to your kids about what, when and how they should eat. There is you, the parent/caregiver, and then there is this world of delicious deep fried, cheese smothered, spicy and crisp, sweet-and-sour, fizzy and brightly colored STUFF that would happily replace whatever real food you have planned to feed yourself

and your family. That's what you're up against. The insidious, nearly invisible, impervious marketing of food-like substances and the messages that push this stuff at every birthday party (pizza and cake ... again), basketball practice (sugary, salty sports drinks), sleep over (microwaveable snacks til dawn!) or just breakfast every day (sugary cereal, sugary pastry, or fat laden biscuit type thing).

Oddly, while there are studies that show how susceptible children are to these food messages, particularly kids younger than 8, little research has been done to shows that positive or healthy food messaging has an impact on consumption. (Folkvord and de Bruijne, 2020) Also, it appears the effects of this food messaging increase with kids' media consumption and that kids through age 10 can't discern misleading health claims made in commercials (i.e. if Cheetos are gluten free then they must be healthier than other snacks). (Binder et al., 2020) This lack of discernment is concerning because kids get enticing albeit unhealthy food messages from the media nonstop, and probably only hear about healthy food messaging when they're eating something they're not supposed to. So it really does come down to what messages are coming from YOU, the real tangible parent/caregiver, versus the ephemeral yet influential WORLD. It is worth noting that really restrictive parental involvement in kids food choices also has a negative effect on kids nutrition knowledge; So statistically, parents who are very strict about what their children eat, and parents who are very demanding or controlling about what their children eat tend to have pickier eaters (Fernandez et al., 2020). Simply saying "Do as I say, not as I do," doesn't empower children to make good food choices, and children need to gain nutritional knowledge and proficiency in order to practice making good choices (Binder et al., 2020). As Binder et al.

(2020) concluded, “Providing rules without explanations leaves children fully subjected to the misinformation prevalent in media presentations.” And that really ties into *why* kids need to learn skills of discernment in order to feel empowered to feed themselves proficiently - a skill they learn from parents/caregivers.

So here is the three fold problem: 1) Parents and kids need some skills to become self-aware when it comes to their own food choices. Notice this is not just a parental suggestion, kids need to be involved too in order to make behavior changes that can have positive life-long impacts. 2) Checking negative behaviors allows for the acquisition of knowledge and new skills (like meal planning or cooking), and expression of new more positive behaviors (making healthier choices or setting regular mealtimes) to break the cycles that tend to happen around mealtimes which are mostly learned behaviors (and therefore can be unlearned, thankfully). 3) Finally, even if parents/caregivers and children are on the same team, the world and its over-the-top food messaging aren't going anywhere, so families have to be equipped to see potential influences and deal with those influences in a positive way.

Problem Statement:

Parents need skills to navigate the barriers, behaviors and attitudes that produce picky eating behaviors in children. This requires an intervention strategy that defines and recenters picky eating as a phenomenon that can be remediated by enhanced self-awareness and self-efficacy in making healthy food choices as a lifestyle by both parents and children, while bolstering families' defenses against aggressive food marketing and media overconsumption.

The next section is going to further explore the theory behind the practices in this manual with my hybridized theoretical framework.

A Theoretical Framework to Empower Parents/Caregivers to Make Healthier Food Choices

In order to address the “phenomenon of picky eating” and its effects on how families are feeding children, I developed a theoretical framework that borrows from both the Health Belief Model (HBM) and the Social Ecological Model (SEM). The goal of the modified framework is to empower children and parents/caregivers in making healthy food choices, and move them away from the causes of picky eating. Picky eating is reported in upwards of 50% of children under the age of six in the U.S. (Emmett et al., 2018; Wolstenholme et al., 2020), and parents fear nutritional deficiencies that could result in physical and emotional damage and the development of eating disorders as a result of picky eating behaviors (Taylor and Emmett, 2019; Steinbekk et al., 2017). The repeated stress that families go through day after day as a result of this perceived pickiness exacerbates negative mealtime behaviors that can contribute to picky eating, creating a negative cycle.

This hybrid model attempts to situate children in the conversation that adults have about feeding kids that tends to happen without including children’s agency, input or influence. By adopting concepts from the HBM, this theoretical framework acknowledges the importance of the beliefs and perceptions of children as an influence on their behavior. Therefore equipping children with education and cues to action for enhanced self-efficacy should produce positive behavioral changes. For both children and parents the sense of the severity of the outcomes from picky eating and the benefits from more balanced food choices and more pleasant meal times will serve

to fuel internal motivation to make lasting behavior changes. With the prevalence of picky eating so widespread in the U.S., it is clear that an intervention is necessary that stimulates the internal motivation of both parties (parents/caregivers and children).

The Health Belief Model

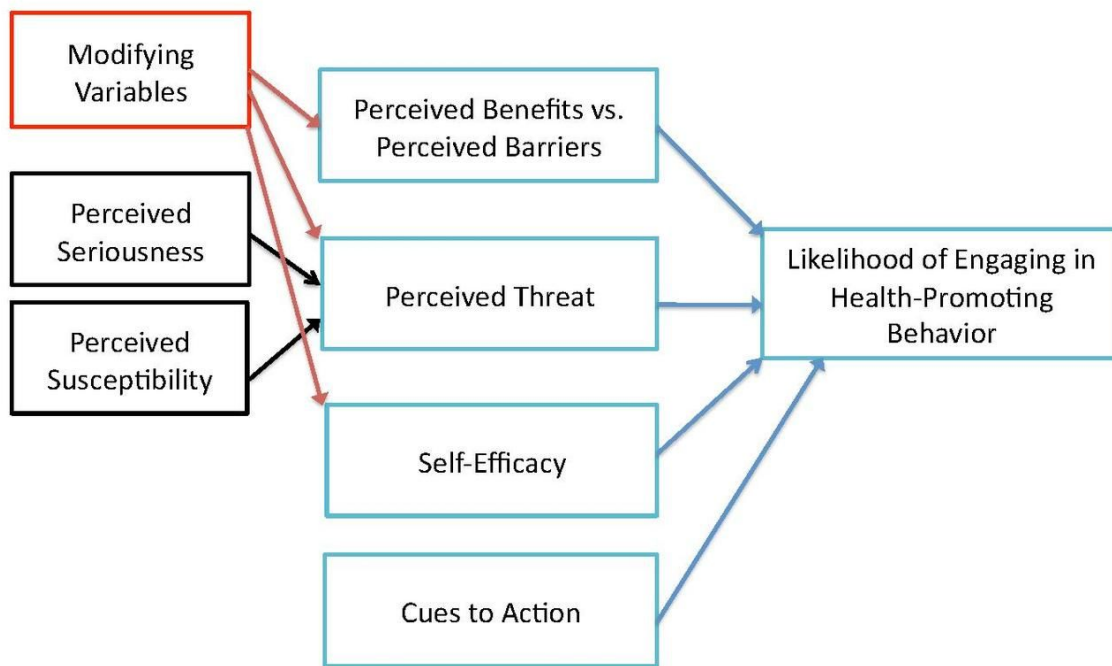


figure 1: *The Health Belief Model*

However, the HBM has limitations in predicting behavioral change. Alan Ulrich, author of *Methods of Stress Management* (2020) described some of those limitations such as environmental factors which may prevent an individual from engaging, or the impact of strong emotions on health behaviors. More about how these emotional influences that predict

behavioral change can be learned from the transtheoretical approach and may be used in future research (Prochaska and Diclemente, 2005).

A way to address these environmental limitations is to pull from the Social Ecological Model where the children represent the innermost circle, and parents, teachers, family, culture, environment, socio-economic status and policies all have an impact on what/when/how children eat. Research suggests the societal influences on parents may even further shape the influences on children (Hu et al., 2019) in a sort of multi-generational effect. Below is an example of how SEM has been applied to childhood obesity. The realms of influence are similar to those influencing what/how/when children eat.

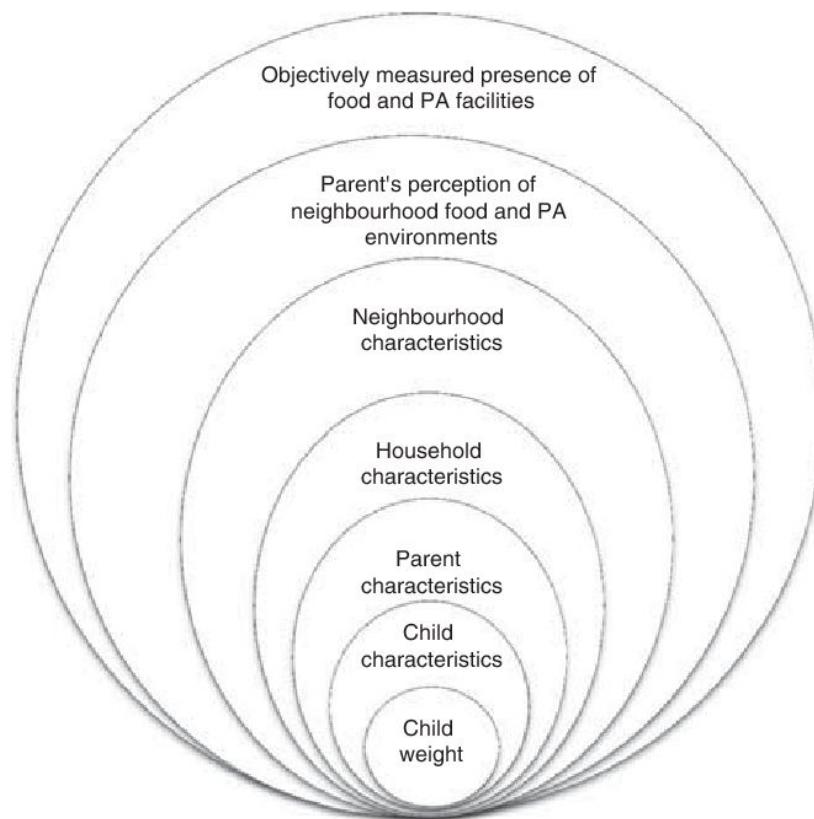


Figure 2: *Social Ecological Model showing the layers influencing a child's weight status (PA, physical activity)* (Vachaspati, 2018)

When thinking about developing a theoretical framework upon which to base “How to Feed a Kid,” I envision a hybrid of these two models. This model aims to increase the consumption of balanced food choices and make a shift in mealtime behaviors that will help reframe the “phenomenon of picky eating” into something that can be addressed through empowered behavior modification.

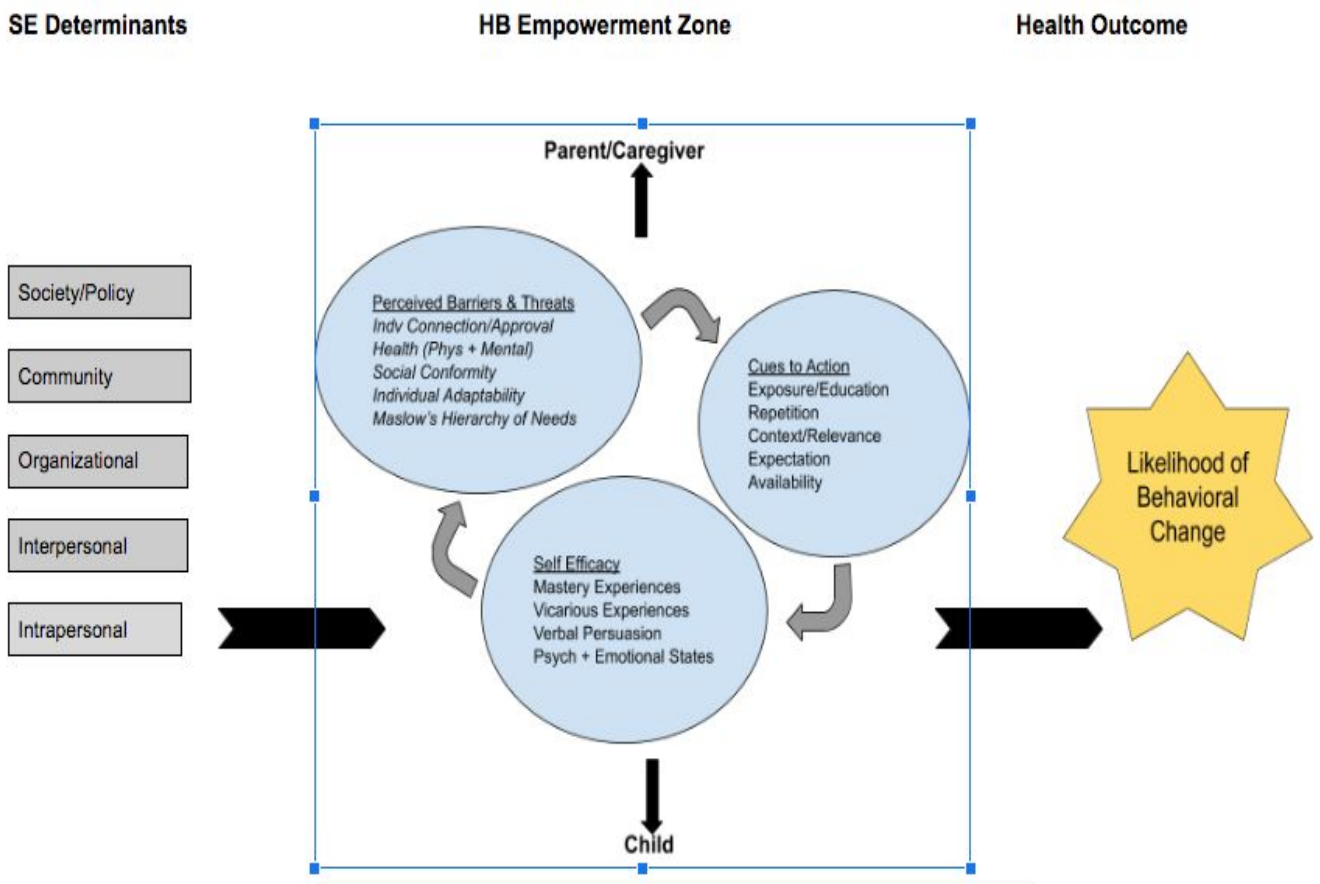


Fig 3: *Hybrid theoretical framework, Asata Reid*

As you can see, I have borrowed the SEM structure of social determinants which have influence over the eating behaviors of children. This can be further illustrated as:

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS IMPACTING FOOD CHOICE/BEHAVIOR

Society/Policy	Community	Organization	Interpersonal	Intrapersonal
National: USDAs National School Lunch Program	Urban/Rural	Schools	Family and Household	Parents/Caregivers: Beliefs/ attitudes, Knowledge/skills, Experience/ embodiment
State: CACFP and Summer Feeding Sites	Cultural Values/Norms (Including the "phenomenon of the picky eater")	Religious and Spiritual Practices	Social Networks and Peers	Children: Beliefs/ attitudes, Knowledge/skills, Experience/ embodiment, Physiology/develop ment/biological factors
Local: Farm to School Initiatives	Media consumption and Aggressive Marketing	Workplace and Social Organizations	SES (Including availability, affordability and accessibility of food)	

Fig 4: Detail of Theoretical Framework: Social Determinants

The social determinants inform what I call the “Empowerment Zone” (see Fig. 4 below). This “Empowerment Zone” takes into consideration influences that shape the perceptions and behaviors of both children and their parents/caregivers. Chapter 4: The Empowerment Zone goes into much more detail about the theoretical framework, but a brief description is given here. The

arrows indicate there is no singular starting or ending position, yet all three realms - assessment of barriers/threats in the environment, cues to action and self-efficacy - create a dynamic interplay that is impactful for both children *and* parents/caregivers to move toward the desired behavioral health outcomes.

Ideally both children *and* parents/caregivers would experience and assess all three realms of the “Empowerment Zone” in order to work together toward healthier eating habits and mealtime behaviors. Research shows the parent-to-child model is not enough to modify children’s behaviors and that building self-efficacy in children around their eating has positive results (Walton et al., 2017). In fact, home behaviors and attitudes have shown to have the greatest impact on child food habits (Cole et al., 2018). However, many parents lack the knowledge, confidence/mastery or self-efficacy in feeding themselves or their families, particularly if their physical/social environment is not supportive of change. Through the “Empowerment Zone” parents and children can assess their strengths and weaknesses to identify, address and overcome obstacles in their path toward success (healthy behaviors). As such, it is important that both parties experience these realms adapted from the Health Belief Model *together* as illustrated below.

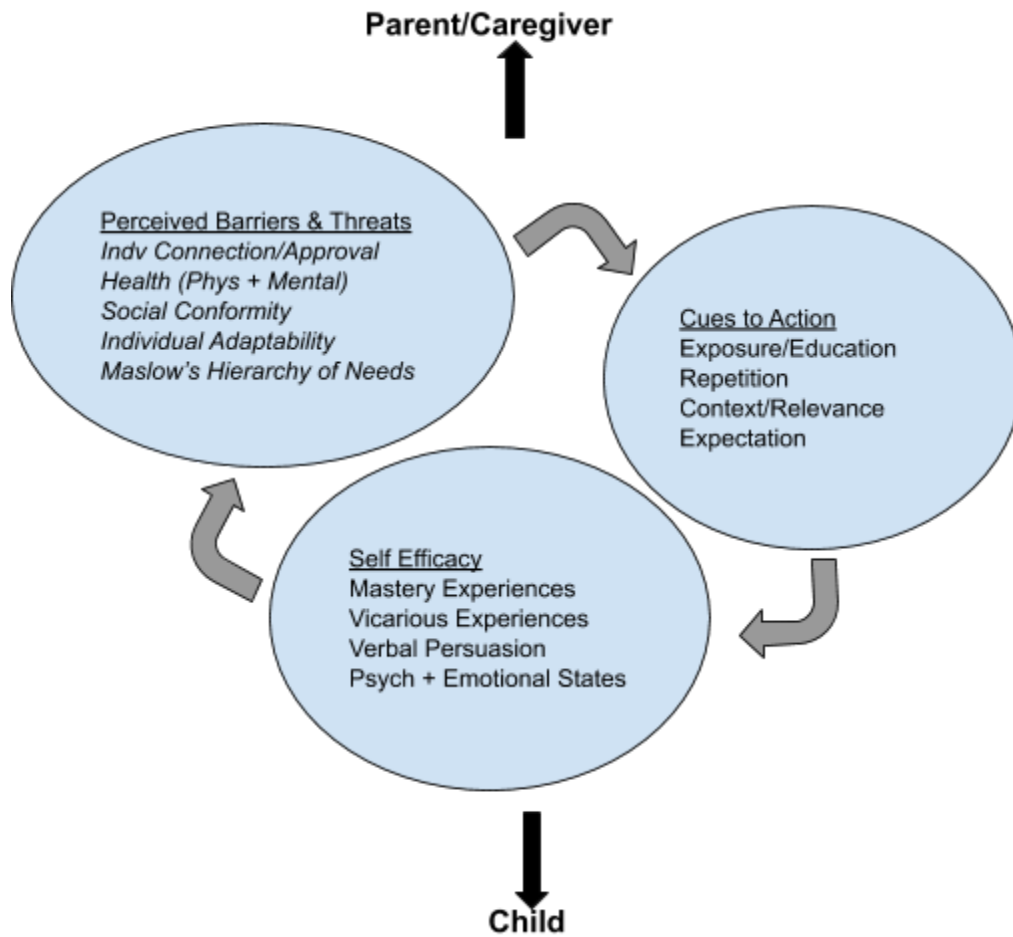


Fig 4: Detail of Theoretical Framework: Empowerment Zone

The desired Behavioral Change (in no particular order) are:

- Improvement in mealtime behaviors, perceptions and attitudes
- Improvement in healthy/balanced food choices by children and parents/caregivers
- Increased awareness on the societal influences on the food choices and eating behaviors of both children and parents/caregivers.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework developed for the thesis project “How to Feed a Kid,” is rooted in two long-standing theoretical approaches to addressing population-based health behaviors: the Social Ecological Model and the Health Belief Model. The social determinants from the SEM inform the internal and external changes that make the HBM valuable to addressing the internal motivations that result in positive, potentially permanent, behavioral change. It is my hope that this model, supported by research and field experience, can reconceptualize how “picky eating” is perceived and addressed in order to reach better health outcomes and mealtime experiences for families.

Purpose Statement

This special thesis project is designed to help parents and caregivers examine the personal, cultural, and environmental influences affecting the food choices that both adults and children make. This project provides: 1) research to help parents better understand the behaviors that shape children’s eating habits; 2) a theoretical framework to empower lasting behavioral change in parents and children; and 3) a guide to help parents navigate specific situations that present as barriers when feeding children.

So back to these 35 million families of which you are one. We are dealing with lots of perceptions, habits and even rituals which may seem like complicated stuff, but it doesn’t have to be that way. Think about this guide as a way to shift the lens on why you eat what you eat, so that you can identify what influences your choices, and so that you can see what is influencing your child’s choices. Once you get clear on your influences, your motivations can shift and we

can reframe eating as a positive, nurturing, healthy experience instead of a nightly tug of war that ends with hurt feelings. It's good work, because parents are the number one influence on children's food choices and behaviors (explained further in the "Picky Eaters" chapter) (Walton et al., 2017; Emmett et al., 2019; Steinsbekk et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2019, Birch et al., 2010). Shifting the focus to you and your behavior takes your kid out of the hot seat for a moment, and you may find ways you have been contributing directly or indirectly to your child's food choice behaviors more than you realized (Mascola et al., 2010). At the very least, this manual is designed to give parents/caregivers practical tips for improving the food choices for their families to support long-term positive health outcomes. If, however, you experience some personal "Eureka!" moments along the way, discover a new family favorite recipe, or just eat more green vegetables during the week, we will call this adventure a success. I've said it before, but I'll say it again, you have two jobs as the parent/caregiver: make nutritious meals and provide them at regular meal times. We'll elaborate on the nuances of this as we throughout the guide.

2: EXPLORING PICKY EATERS

One afternoon, my after school Cooking and Nutrition class of four-year-olds prepared sauteed summer squash with fresh basil. Afterwards, as I was wheeling my wagon of supplies back to the car I noticed a woman making a beeline toward me cutting across the parking lot. She waived one hand high above her head and in the other she clutched the hand of a little blond boy whose legs were pumping to keep up with her. He was a quiet boy from my Cooking and Nutritious class with big blue eyes and a great appetite. “Chef! Chef!” she called across the parking lot. I paused to let her catch up. “How did you get him to eat squash?” she inquired, slightly out of breath. I looked at the boy and said, “Oh, that’s right! You had seconds and thirds today, didn’t you?” He smiled a big, proud smile and nodded his head. “HOW DID YOU DO THAT?” she demanded. “I can’t get him to eat *any* vegetables! He’s so *picky!*”

This is a common refrain. Parents lament picky eaters around the globe and the prevalence is considered common (Walton et al., 2017; Taylor and Emmett, 2019; Steinsbekk et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2018; Wolstenholme et al., 2020). In parents of preschoolers, reports of picky eating is high, between 14%-50% (Walton et al., 2017; Wolstenholme et al., 2020). There have always been children who have strong preferences about what they do and do not like to eat, however, the emphasis on “picky eaters” as a phenomenon is more recent and a problem relegated to research in wealthier countries. I think it would be helpful in moving the needle on children’s eating habits if we had a clear definition of “picky” or “selective” eating, yet despite the apparently common prevalence of picky eaters, there is no working definition or definitive tool for measurement of pickiness in the body of research on feeding children (Emmet et al., 2019; Wolstenholme et al., 2020).

What is Picky Eating?

Parents tend to define picky eating as broadly as a child’s rejection of what the parent has offered to eat, a frequency of presented picky behavior. Specifically parents describe picky eating as

consuming a small intake of food or a limited variety of foods, a strong dislike or like for certain foods, a resistance to trying or liking new foods (neophobia); and a dislike for textures, appearance (including specific colors), and a general negative attitude around meals and mealtimes. (Trofholz et al., 2017; Mascola et al., 2010)

And, for such a common occurrence, each parent still seems to interpret their child's behavior as unusual, problematic and potentially dangerous. Parents report concerns of malnutrition, psychological issues and often parents take it personally, all of which may exacerbate the issue (Taylor and Emmett, 2019; Steinbekk et al., 2017). Parents describe life with their picky eaters filled with food fights especially at meal times, with the focus of the argument being the type of food more so than the amount of food (think: Eat your vegetables vs Finish your plate). Parents of picky eaters are more likely to prepare items or entire dishes for their picky eater separate from the rest of the family, and they are more likely to comment on what their picky eater is (or isn't) eating (Mascola et al., 2010). As the saying goes, the struggle is real.

However, pickiness in preschoolers has less to do with the food offered and is more a common result of slowed physical growth and increasing self awareness as children demonstrate more autonomy. Young children can control very few things in their world: what they will and will not wear, when and where they use the restroom, and what they will and will not eat are high on their list and high on the list of frustrations for their parents. As Jennifer Traig (2019) wrote in The New York Times Essay "The Making of a Picky Eater," "Modern children learn very early that food is one area where they can wield some agency. Long before they can control what comes out of their bodies, they're controlling what goes into them." A study of Norwegian four-year olds showed that half of the study's subjects were defined as picky just two years later (Steinsbekk et al., 2017) which may give some parents of preschoolers a bit of hope. Pickiness for most subjects in studies declines after the age of six.

If we reframe this behavior as normal childhood development in young children, or even somewhat defiant behavior that's typical at this age as they test boundaries and become more self

aware, then we can also diffuse the label “picky eater” and all of the negative connotations that come with it (Walton et al., 2017). If being a picky eater is the cause of the bomb that goes off every night at dinner time, then a shift in this perspective is an important step in reorienting the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors associated with family meal times. Why is this important? Well, research shows parents’ behaviors and attitudes around food and feeding choices are the major influence of over children’s attitudes and food choices (Walton et al., 2017; Emmett et al., 2019; Steinsbekk et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2019, Birch et al., 2010). In short, by being a worried and concerned parent, possibly harboring your own biases about what and how children should eat, prescribing a “Do what I say, not as I do” approach to eating, and maybe not being a great “healthy eating role model” yourself, you may be creating your own little mealtime tyrant.

The Idea of “Kid Food”

Historically, the phrase “picky eater” didn’t enter the American lexicon until the 1970s. There is little written evidence of children refusing food until the early 20th century.

In 1894, American pediatrician Luther Emmett Holt published “The Care and Feeding of Children” which gives very detailed descriptions of what and how children should be fed at different life stages. Holt suggested a diet of bland and soft food - even oatmeal was to be boiled for hours - and no raw vegetables to aid in the optimal temperament, health and digestion for children. He wrote, “As a rule salads of all kinds should be omitted until a child has passed the tenth year. Salads are difficult to digest and a cause of much disturbance in children of all ages.” (Holt, 1894.) Besides causing indigestion, sanitation and refrigeration practices at the time probably made raw vegetables a liability due to bacterial transmission. This may have set the stage for the belief that children dislike vegetables, a belief that is perpetuated to this day. Holt does concede that canned vegetables are acceptable but insists they be well cooked to be bland and soft, therefore suitable for children’s delicate constitutions. It is interesting that in nearly a decade of experience in cooking with children, I have found

that children enjoy eating vegetables, sometimes to their own surprise and often at the astonishment of parents. In my experience, kids tend to prefer vegetables minimally cooked so that both texture, color and flavor are preserved, contrary to Holt's recommendations. They also enjoy big bold flavors (not necessarily spicy) versus bland, mushy food. Here lies one hint in the answer to the question of the mother mentioned in the beginning of this section: "How did you get him to eat squash?"

Of particular interest in Holt's publication is the attention given to parental behavior regarding feeding children.

GENERAL RULES TO BE OBSERVED IN FEEDING

Bad habits of eating are readily acquired but difficult to break. Young children should not be allowed to play with their food, nor should the habit be formed of amusing or diverting them while eating, because by these means more food is taken.

Older children should not be permitted to make an entire meal of one thing, no matter how proper this may be.

Children who are allowed to have their own way in matters of eating are very likely to be badly trained in other respects; while those who have been properly trained in matters of eating can usually be easily trained to do anything else that is important.

Learning to eat proper things in a proper way forms therefore a large part of a child's early education. If careful training in these matters is begun at the outset and continued, the results will well repay the time and effort required.

It is worth unpacking this passage in our pursuit of reframing our understanding of modern picky eaters because there is wisdom in Holt's Victorian verbiage that can help prevent or remediate picky eating behaviors. Holt's first sentence starts with discussing bad habits of eating. These are learned perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors most likely passed from parent/caregiver to

child. I can not state strongly enough how important it is to get to know your own eating behaviors, and biases when it comes to food because in many cases, the children are mirroring what they have learned from us, the adults in the room. The matter is further complicated because in modern terms these bad habits are also learned from societal influences (commercials and ads that promote sugary drinks and fast food) and other environments where children are served food (school breakfasts and lunches featuring pre-packaged convenience foods, and sports and activities where sugary snacks and sports drinks are served as the norm.) We will discuss these societal influences in more depth, however it should be noted that the learned behaviors are, as Holt wrote, “readily acquired but difficult to break.”

As we continue to analyze Holt’s passage above, the sentiment of playing with your food is one that has shifted in modern times. Even growing up in the 1970s, I was admonished not to play with my food. Food was a serious matter. It cost money to acquire, time to prepare, and was considered valuable fuel for growth and development. However, look in the aisle of any grocery store in the U.S. now in 2020, and you can find colorful divided plates shaped like the cute faces of pandas, frogs and pigs, spoons that look like a fleet of mini-airplanes, all all manner of cups in a variety of shapes, themes and characters. Feeding young children in particular has become a game, sometimes a nightly competition, as parents playfully force “just one more bite,” ignoring the innate fullness cues that most children possess. Many adults are surprised to find that a child’s stomach is roughly the size of that child’s closed fist. Without that knowledge, meal times have become a circus of colorful and character-printed table scapes designed to keep a child’s interest at the table with the goal of getting as much food into them as possible.

Holt also lists 10 rules that should be followed when feeding children, and this dissuading of playing with food ties into #4 on that list:

“Children should not be continually urged to eat if they are disinclined to do so at their regular hours of feeding, or if the appetite is habitually poor, and under no circumstances should a child be forced to eat.”

The combination of food as entertainment (which can have associations in later years with emotional eating and overeating) and the warning not to force (or coax, bribe, plead or beg) disinterested children at regular mealtimes (which can lead to ignoring natural hunger/fullness cues and overeating) can both contribute to obesity long term and poor eating habits for life. Add to that the promise of “dessert” which adds empty calories on top of an already full child and you can see how parents are the first line in sending mixed messaging around mealtimes to the very kids they’re trying to feed.

As for the passage regarding the “proper” training, we can tie the training (or lack thereof) to children in their eating (and other) habits to the expectations of the adults with whom the kids interact. It is a common anecdotal experience of teachers to report positive behavior from students who have problematic behavior at home, or vice versa. Often kids will act out where they can *because* they can (little to no perception/seriousness of harm, according to the Health Belief Model), and where the expectation exists that those behaviors are unacceptable, the kids will “straighten up and fly right” as the saying goes. Even children who have more defiant natures tend to follow overall societal, classroom and team rules as part of human methods of socialization. Centuries later, research backs up Holt’s claim of proper training suggesting that when children have control over feeding times and behaviors such as television watching during mealtimes are allowed, higher odds of picky behavior result. Conversely, a positive atmosphere during family mealtimes, as well as predictable or ritualized meal activities (setting table, saying grace) are associated with lower odds of picky eating behavior (Cole et al., 2018; McCarthy 2020).

The final section is simply about learned behavior. And even though it sounds pious with the use of “proper,” it is accurate. Learning how to eat, when to eat, and what acceptable table behavior looks like is taught in early care settings today. Children learn how to socialize at meal times. They also learn how to self-serve and estimate how much they require to eat during family-style lunches, and they exercise motor skills while learning how to pour milk and water from large to

small vessels. Children set the tables for meals, clean up afterwards and connect sanitation practices like handwashing to meals.

A year after Holt's publication, Scottish physician Thomas Dutton advised parents to feed children a modified diet in the book, "The Rearing and Feeding of Children: A Practical Mother's Guide" (Dutton 1895). Dutton held the idea that there were four "great errors" parents committed in feeding their children: "Under feeding, Over feeding, Food deficient in the proper elements, Food suitable for older persons." In that year, when asked "What do you feed your child?" Dutton reported parents would respond with, "Oh! [H]e eats the same as we do - a little potato and gravy, sucks a bit of meat, and sometimes has a drop of his daddie's [sic] beer." Dutton argued that certain foods are unsuitable for children's digestion and development. Along with alcohol, he suggested that rich foods and foods high in sugar - "foods suitable for older persons" - should be kept out of sight of children so that they do not develop a taste for them and ruin their health. (Dutton, 1895)

Holt and Dutton are illustrations of how the Victorian era experts understood that food was vitally important to not only the survival of kids, but the key to accessing their potential success and long term health from infancy to adulthood. They also strongly promoted that the wrong foods would disturb the temperament of children (making them "cross"), their immunity, and their ability to thrive physically and mentally. Food for children, therefore, required more consideration, examination and thoughtful selection and preparation than food for adults. The seed was planted that somehow children were "different" than adults, and if "good" parents treated them differently, then the children would have a leg up in the game of life. It has to be noted, however, that this was primarily for well-to-do children, as the gaping distance between the Haves and the Have Nots made food access, affordability and variety a stark disparity. During the Victorian era, poor children regularly received scraps or were left to forage, food was not always available and was often prioritized for working adults, poor mothers were reported to produce inadequate milk and children were often transitioned to solid food earlier than wealthier children. For poor people, there were not the options of whether or not to eat.

Shortly after that, “nursery foods” became popular (notoriously disgusting boiled and mashed food combinations) and the growing trend in concerns over “proper” regular mealtimes (a reflection of a woman’s domestic dominance was her ability to serve meals “on time.”) extended to include concerns over hungry, irritable children or those sickly, underfed children with poor appetites.

The “Phenomenon of Picky Eating”

The growing dilemma of the pickiness of America’s children resulted in the 1930 address to the Pediatric American Society by its president, Joseph Brennemann, who estimated half of American children were refusing what they were served (Traig, 2019). And here is where it gets interesting. He blamed this pickiness on the parents’ excessive interest in their children’s diets stating, “A nutritional millennium seemed at hand. And then a strange thing happened. The child refused to eat. I know of no stranger paradox than this: The better intentioned the home, the better the food, the more precise the application of feeding rules and regulations, the more stubborn the refusal.” (Traig, 2019) In this statement, made almost a century ago, Brennemann identified what started as an upper-class issue where children with the most choice and the most high-quality food available and with the predictable feeding regimens *were least likely to willingly eat it*. That “paradox” grew into a phenomenon over the rest of the 20th century to impact families of all socio-economic demographics in the U.S. The “phenomenon of the picky eater.”

What caused this phenomenon, you may ask. The answer is complex, not nearly as simple as Holt’s suggested “lack of training” of the kids or Brennemann’s blame on parental coddling. Let’s take a quick tour of 20th century U.S.A. to see how this picky eating phenomenon gained traction to the point of being accepted as a cultural norm.

America has had a love affair with sugar since the late 1800s, and Big Sugar's rise in the early 1900s coincided with the introduction and popularity of grain cereals - first promoted as a health food, then combined with sugar to make an irresistibly sweet and convenient "meal" in a bowl. Timed in sync with American industrialism, breakfast cereal was attractively affordable, fast and its popularity among children (and therefore parents) laid a template for future processed foods to target their marketing toward children. The expansion of enticing "kid foods" available led to kids demanding those specific foods (Traiger, 2019). In fact, child-specific foods and the acceptance of picky eaters in children was so prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s that TV commercials featuring the most infamous picky eater of all time "Little Mikey," the star of the Quaker Oat's Life Cereal commercials, became part of iconic American media, and the Dr. Seuss book about another reluctant eater, "Green Eggs and Ham," is now considered a children's classic.

A shift had taken place in consumerism, where children now had a significant influence over the foods purchased in the household. In a 1975 study, Mehrotra and Torges observed "children reported that when they asked for particular food items such as cereal, snack food, or candy, parents complied about 75% of the time." That year Mehrotra and Torges reported media expenditures in excess of \$86 million dollars to target children in advertising. Fast forward four decades and a 2019 report by the National Retail Federation found that of parents surveyed: 87% said their children influenced their purchase decisions; 88% said their children influenced their food and drink purchases; and 87% of parents say their children influenced their dining out purchases (NRF, 2019).

At the end of the 20th century, not only were individual households under the sway of the influence of their youngest residents, entire institutions traditionally concerned with child-well being, such as schools and after-school programs, had caved to the demands for "kid food" serving chocolate milk, fruit gummy snacks and rainbow colored fish shaped crackers on a daily basis. Even "healthy foods" had media campaigns targeting kids with produce departments adorned with Sesame Street characters in grocery stores and yogurt promoted by the cartoon

character SpongeBob Squarepants and Disney princesses. School lunches had taken on the appearance of fast food restaurants with chicken nuggets, fries, burgers and pizza as top offerings.

To combat all of this processed food consumption in schools, The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 introduced reforms to the USDA's School Nutrition Lunch and Breakfast Programs during the Obama era (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2018). This act expanded access to free-and-reduced lunch programs, and included maximum limits on sugar, fat and salt and minimums for fruits, vegetables and whole grains served to children, however they were rolled back during the following presidential administration in 2018.

As kid food became an acceptable norm in the U.S., many people began to look for solutions to improve school food in the new millennium. In 2014, several books were published by Americans who relocated to France and were surprised by how well the French children ate and behaved at meal times. *Bringing Up Bebe* by Pamela Druckerman and *French Kids Eat Everything* by Karen Le Billon were bestsellers that shifted parental gaze to examine what they could do to improve mealtime choices and behaviors in their own kids. The examination of school lunches served in France and Japan offered examples of how children not only ate “real food” but they were also responsible for serving their classmates and cleaning up after meals. As an American who relocated to Japan, Donald Ash runs a blog about his experiences in Japan and documented several week's of Japanese school lunches and how they differ from typical American lunches on his blog <https://www.thejapanguy.com/ten-days-japanese-school-lunch/> (2012). Karen Le Billon looks at French school lunches in depth (from policy to modernization) in her blog <https://karenlebillon.com/french-school-lunch-menus/> (2014). There is a lot that parents can take away from the mealtime cultures and practices discussed in both of those blogs to enhance mealtime preparation and experiences with their own children. And the cultures and policies that support healthy eating beyond just household expectations.

But reality check: is *every* meal with your family going to be home made starting with a vegetable course or homemade soup? Absolutely not. And that isn't the intended takeaway of sharing those blogs, or any of this information. The goal is to highlight the healthy intention behind the meals, served collaboratively with child involvement. Children are responsible for what they eat from healthy offerings, and how much they eat. Children are also responsible for cleaning and maintaining their eating spaces. Children have responsibility, buy in and are part of the eating processes and rituals.

Predictors for Pickiness in Children

As stated earlier, the increase in pickiness is complex. The review of history in the previous section shows a sort of macroview of trends across the nation that normalized pickiness as a childhood trait in the U.S. However there are other markers that can predict a child's pickiness as they transition to solid foods and through different developmental stages as they grow and mature.

As we work to reframe our perspectives on pickiness, it is important to recognize these milestones so as not to conflate normal child development with picky eating. Again the reason for this is if you as a parent perceive your child's behavior as pickiness you will treat it as such and feed into the myth with all the negative connotations: the anticipation of negative mealtime interactions; the placation, negotiations and substitution; the dinnertime drama. If you recognize your child's behavior as just part of their personal growth and exploration, then you can support them in that by doing what parents do: provide healthy meals and regular mealtimes.

Let's start with the youngest children. While there is no singular predictor for pickiness, studies have shown evidence that infants with weaker sucking frequency as infants, and had early introduction to lumpy solids show greater odds of developing picky behaviors. Studies also suggest that breastfeed has a positive impact on future eating habits because it may expose babies to a more varied flavor experience, based upon the mother's diet, and may affect the

acceptance of new foods in general, but specifically when babies transition to solids (Birch et al., 2007). Breastfeeding may be particularly influential in the acceptance of vegetables which often present a bitter flavor profile. Humans are born with a preference for sweet and salty tastes, and bitter flavors present a challenge for young children. However, if babies have been exposed repeatedly to those flavor compounds through their mother's breast milk, they are more likely to have a tolerance for them (Birch et. al, 2007). It is the principal of familiarization that is discussed in more detail below.

Children have a natural instinct to avoid new foods (food neophobia) as a sort of safety mechanism as they are learning the world. Neophobia seems to be exacerbated when parents try to expose children to new foods too frequently, or when they force their will by trying to coerce children, or when parents introduce too many new foods at a time. It goes against the child's natural instinct that tells them to stick with what they know is safe. Familiarization can reduce neophobia, and it usually takes multiple exposures over several weeks in a pleasant and non-confrontive way for children to open up to new foods. Studies show that kids will increase their intake of vegetables after five exposures, but the rule of thumb that kids require eight to 10 exposures to something new to truly accept it (Nekitsing et al., 2018; Birch et al., 2007). Keep in mind this is true for most kids, and that some will fall on each end of the bell curve based on their personality. You know your kids, and you know that some are more adventurous and some are naturally more reserved so keep this in mind when introducing new foods and experiences. If you have to force a food tasting, it isn't worth it. I like to refer to this familiarization process at the "Eggplant File" (see the "Picky Eaters" chapter from the guide or the explanation in "Section 4: The Empowerment Zone").

Preschool aged children who ate slower than their counterparts, or consumed less calories in general show a predisposition to picky behaviors. There may even be a small link to genetic predisposition, but most studies point to parents' behaviors and attitudes as more of a factor than genetic markers (Mascola et al., 2010; Wolstenholme 2020). It is important to establish healthy eating habits early because studies show that the quality of nutrition in the U.S. and Canada tends

to decline from childhood into adolescence with deficiencies in fruits, vegetables, grains and milk and an excess of energy consumption (calories) of 10-30% (Birch et al., 2007). What that means is that kids eat less nutrient dense foods that have higher calories - junk food - with the transition into adolescence. Add to that an increase in sugary drinks, more food consumed away from home, and a tendency to skip breakfast and family meals. This is why it is important that children and teens be a part of the conversation about what they eat. As they gain more autonomy in these choices without parental guidance and supervision, they must possess their own values for making balanced food choices. Identifying their influences is one thing, but if a child possesses the self awareness to perceive a threat to their health or wellbeing - now or in the future - based on their food choices, they will be better equipped to resist the negative influences that they encounter - be it peer pressure, advertising or fast food menu selections. The ultimate goal is to encourage critical thinking about food choices and connecting those choices to a lifetime of health outcomes. (Folkvord and de Bruijne, 2020)

The Impact of Picky Eating on Child Health

Today more than ever there is an incredible amount of pressure on parents and caregivers to provide the best and be hypervigilant over every aspect of children's lives. In the era of helicopter parenting (Luna, 2018) it may be something of a relief to know that several studies have revealed very little evidence that there are long term effects on the growth trajectories of picky eaters. (Emmett et al., 2018; Wolstenholme et al., 2020) Picky eaters may miss out on major nutrients like iron and zinc (especially if they don't like meat or vegetables), and they may have a low fiber which can lead to constipation if they aren't fond of vegetables or fruits. Picky eaters tend to have a lower body mass index (BMI) and be underweight "in a good way" compared to their peer group, because recall we are experiencing a childhood obesity epidemic. Recall the data from earlier that said 50% of four-year-olds in one study had outgrown their picky eating behaviors by age six. Another study cited the number of picky eaters over the age of six as "very low." In fact, most of the research on picky eating is done on children ages six and under, and in studies that persisted into adolescence the presentation and duration of picky eating did not significantly change after the age of six. This means that kids who were still picky or

presented as picky eaters after six maintained a sort of “flat line” in their behavior, not presenting escalating or de-escalating behaviors (Emmett et al, 2018). Another study suggests that kids that rank persistently “high” in pickiness ages 4 to 9 years tended to stay that way (Fernandez et al., 2020). It should be noted that persistent picky eating that lasts through adolescence can be an early marker for an eating disorder in the teenage and adult years, but this is for a small subgroup of picky eaters that have been subjects of research (Emmett et al., 2018).

3: PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON PICKY EATING

So we've learned that parents are the most influential factor on picky eating behaviors (Walton et al, 2017; Steinsbekk et al., 2017; Taylor and Emmet, 2018; Cole et al., 2018). So, parents deserve their own chapter, not just to see how we affect our kids' food choices negatively, but also to offer some advice from scientific research and my years of field work with kids so that parents/caregivers can gain some knowledge, skills and practical application in feeding their families.

So, What Does the Research Say?

In a study about picky eating behaviors, 56% of the children were considered by their parents to be "choosy" by 15 months. Of those, 17% were still considered to be very picky by age three if the mother wasn't worried about their child's choosiness. However, if the mother was "*very worried by the choosiness,*" 50% of the children were still considered to be very picky by age three. So if your toddler starts to exert preferences, try not to fret and jump to the "picky eating" conclusion (Taylor and Emmet, 2019). This is far more likely just the normal expression by a

child of what they like and don't like, and it changes day to day (sometimes minute to minute). The presence of the mothers' worry with all other variables being considered had the most influence over the childrens' choosy behavior.

That same study showed that the mothers providing fresh fruit and eating the same meal as the children was protective against choosiness, unlike serving ready-prepared food which was predictive of choosy behavior by children (Emmet et al., 2018). Good news! Your days of separate meals and acting like a short-order cook are over. One family, one meal. And while you're at it, minimize the processed stuff in lieu of fresh fruit and real food to get a better response from your preschooler. This also sets the stage for mealtime expectations that will stick with your kid for years to come.

In another study of nearly 1,000 parents about their child's pickiness, tools were used to gauge childrens' temperaments, measure parents' emotional sensitivity to their children, and assess how structured their meals and mealtimes were. The results suggested that parental structuring reduced picky eating over the course of two years. Also children who were considered sensory sensitive had increased odds of pickiness two years later. Parents who had higher levels of emotional sensitivity and lower levels of structure were also at risk for increased odds of pickiness in their children. (Steinsbekk et al., 2017).

So what does this mean? First, it pays to know your kid so that you have an idea of their temperament and how well they tolerate changes like new foods. Sensory issues are real, not

imaginary, and can be as subtle as a preference for the texture of roasted broccoli versus boiled broccoli; or as severe as not liking the feeling of chewed food on their gums. Sensory issues around food will follow a child who has sensory issues in any other realm, so keep that and your child's temperament in mind. Also, how sensitive are you to your child's reactions to, well, anything? If you "hate to see her upset" at every level of life, you may struggle at mealtimes. The reality is everyone isn't going to love everything you prepare, not even you. And kids are just wishy washy - one day they love red bell peppers and the next they *loathe* them and you won't know that until you're sitting at the table watching them unenthusiastically pick at their food. If you wince everytime your son turns his nose up at something, you may be really sensitive to your child's reactions. So, if you adjust your expectations (because this has *nothing* to do with you and everything to do with his expression of his own preferences, which he is perfectly entitled to as a sentient being) and focus on providing structure, you may have more success at meal times. Remember your role: provide nutritious food at regular mealtimes. This structure element is reiterated in other studies as well (Birch et al., 2009; Wolstenholme et al., 2020).

In another study (Birch et al., 2009) parents who used coercion to get their kids to eat - either pressure to eat healthier, limitation on food or food as a reward - reaped unintended consequences because the children didn't learn to self regulate. Remember hunger cues and regulation are a natural occurrence in most healthy people, until we tamper with it. By learning to respond to external parental demands, these kids also learned how to ignore their own regulation systems. As a result children developed a preference for and over consumption of the restricted foods when they were available. Children with poor self regulation tend to consume

more calories than they need which can lead to weight gain. And from the “do as I say, not as I do playbook,” parents who pressure their kids to consume more fruits and vegetables are associated with lower fruit and vegetable consumption and higher intakes of dietary fat - just the opposite of what those parents probably intended. Finally, this study suggested that food as a reward has the effect of decreasing the preference for those foods.

So what the study and others (Hu et al., 2019; Wolstenholme et al., 2020; Fernandez et al., 2020) are basically saying is, no matter how you try to manipulate your kid to make her eat or eat more healthy foods, it is going to backfire. If she isn't a willing participant investing in feeding herself, you're always going to have a power struggle on your hands. You can't *make* someone want to do something healthy for themselves. They have to be internally motivated, and that's not easy. Think about how people want to lose weight or quit smoking. All the programs, coercion, punishment in the world won't make a difference until that person makes up their mind to make a change. Your kid is no different. She's still a person, just one with limited time on the job. This is tied to self-efficacy, which is discussed more in section 4.

That same study also looked at parenting styles. The authoritarian style of feeding that places high demands on children with low responsiveness to the children's needs. The study suggests this promotes overeating which leads to overweight, and food rejection and food pickiness. However an authoritative style of feeding that places high demands on eating behavior while also being responsive to eating cues promotes healthier eating behaviors. So this comes down to the “finish your plate” style versus “eat until you're full” style. And the study suggests the “do as I

do” parents that model healthy behaviors at meal times have a stronger positive effect on children’s eating habits than the “do as I say” parents. Kids don’t just learn about eating behaviors from their parents though. Adults, peers and others can all have a positive, indirect impact through social modeling. A strong cue for caregivers such as teachers, coaches, and teams to place healthy behaviors as a priority in modeling socially desirable and acceptable norms for kids.

One of our goals as parents is to raise independent, self-sufficient adults. One study (Binder et al., 2002) noted that all the nagging, begging, limiting and controlling did nothing to enhance children's knowledge of nutrition. In fact, compounding parental mediation with increased media consumption by kids showed that kids knew even less about nutrition to the degree that the higher the kids’ media consumption, the less effect anything the parents did would offset the misinformation from the media. In another study (Cole et al., 2018), watching television during mealtimes increased picky behaviors in children. Since children have endless opportunities for media exposure, the misinformation about food and nutrition hits them all day long (kid-think goes: “If a super athlete drinks that sports drink it *must* be good for me;” “If princess so-and-so is on the box, it must be meant for me;” and if “that tiger eating cereal has all this energy to be a pro skateboarder, then that cereal will give me energy too.”). And kid-think simply isn’t offset by your side comment to “finish your vegetables.” You can’t compete with the media’s food messaging like that. Marketers are targeting your kid with billions of dollars and an entire degree-holding staff trained to get inside your kid’s head, and you’re offhandedly piling frozen peas and carrots on the plate. You have to be more intentional.

So let's work out a game plan. Let's say you feed a kid three times a day for 18 years, that's 19,710 meals. According to the Binder et. al (2020) study, if you badger and harangue your kids for each of those meals they will have learned nothing about how to actually feed themselves. So let's reframe our position, once again, and consider at least *half* of these meals are opportunities for both you and your kid to learn something about food: where it comes from, how it's grown, who in the world eats it, how it is cooked, and/or its nutritional benefits. This doesn't have to be a structured conversation with Jeopardy like fast-click answers. It can be an opportunity for genuine curiosity and exploration to take place. The key word is *opportunity*. This is an opportunity for modeling desired behaviors, engagement and inclusion and a way to develop and reinforce expected behavior. All good things supported by these studies. You won't nag your way into developing a healthy eater, and you can't make your kid into one without their engagement and self-motivation. You can help yourself and your kid develop skills like inquisitiveness, critical thinking, active listening, logical debate and other life skills that have a funny way of positively influencing healthy behaviors.

There's one more thing I want to touch on and it has to do with how you, as the parent/caregiver, internalize this interaction with your kids. A study revealed three key beliefs that a parent develops in response to a child's eating behavior: self-efficacy beliefs, attribution of picky eating, and beliefs about hunger regulation (Wolstenholme et al, 2020). So for example if a child is a notoriously picky eater, a parent may experience low self-efficacy by *not* serving

healthy choices because they feel they'll be met with resistance (ex: "Why bother, he isn't going to eat it" or "You're not going to like that"). Parents with a higher sense of self-efficacy would carry out the mission despite the possibility of resistance because they feel maybe a personal motivation to do so. Parents who identify characteristics or issues they know are related to pickiness (ex: "She doesn't like the texture" or "He's just stubborn") do so to justify or provide a rationale for not serving healthy choices. A parent who believes there is something wrong with their child's ability to regulate and respond to their own hunger cues will push the agenda about how much and what a child eats regardless of the child's personal needs.

A lot of parents take their children's food choices and behaviors personally. I can't stress this enough: however your child eats, it isn't about you. You only have to provide nutritious food at regular mealtimes. The rest really is in the realm of the personal power of that child. You can't possibly know what's going on in their mind, and the crazy power struggles they concoct as part of normal growth and development. Normal kids will push boundaries, test limits. Normal kids will reject what they've always done and adopt strange new behaviors out of the blue. Normal kids will obsess over one food item to the point you're convinced they must be made of it, and then abandon it suddenly. You don't have to figure out the why and what's next. Do yourself a favor by committing to a mostly healthy diet made up of real food served at meal times because that's what's good for *you*, and trust that your kids will learn more from your positive example and positive experiences with you than from any amount of negative interactions. Research suggests that positive mealtime interactions and mealtime rituals are associated with lower odds

of picky eating behavior after only one year (Cole et al.; 2018).

Now that we have the research to back up our approach - make nutritious meals at regular meal times - the next part of this section offers chapters that will help parents/caregivers navigate real-world settings. More chapters are included in the Appendix. Read them through, or choose topic by topic.

HOW TO FEED A KID: THE GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

I think parenting persists because no one really knows what they are getting into as they anticipate the birth, adoption or arrival of their child. In the excited maelstrom of anticipated experiences - first steps and first words, snuggles and tickles, birthdays and family holidays - older, wiser parents either forget to mention some of the more challenging aspects of parenting, or maybe they omit their personal horror stories from some sense of shame, or maybe they've buried their parenting battle scars beneath the fog of distant memories. Quite likely, seasoned parents know that no matter how sagacious and well meaning their words may be, soon-to-be parents will never be able to comprehend how much they are about to obsess over, yell (yes, yell) and weep and beg about, seek advice on and be reduced to a deflated failure because of this new, little person's eating habits.

From the day children are born, parents are instructed to vigilantly watch the food intake and, by proxy, the waste output of their babies. Parents are warned that poor nutrition and inadequate sustenance will irreparably damage their precious children. Physical, mental, emotional, social and academic failings all gather around the table laden with heaping servings of criticisms and assessments of the quality, quantity and consistency of a child's diet. Parents themselves are struggling with their own food related issues, and are swimming against the current in this ever fattening society that boasts an explosion of metabolic diseases. And yet, miraculously upon the arrival of their offspring, they are supposed to deliver regular, balanced, healthy and delicious meals -- a skill that they never mastered for themselves. Without training, or even explicit instruction, they are charged with providing the fuel and sustenance that will make or break the next generation, and they are ill prepared to do so.

It is so heart-warming to listen to new parents as they marvel over their newborns when they are settling in at home. I have been there myself cooing and sighing over impossibly tiny fingers and noses, sniffing that intoxicating new baby smell off of the top of baby's head, or as I bury my nose into that tender crease between baby's cheek and neck to inhale all that is good in the world. New parents, starry eyed and not yet sleep deprived, wistfully whisper, "I can't believe they actually let me take her out of the hospital." With visions of fishing trips and driving lessons, they say, "I can't believe I'm now someone's dad." Their view of the future is so bright and promising, unblemished and gleaming with possibility. It's sweet. And that lasts about a day, a week if they're lucky, because typically by day three at home, the digestion questions begin.

Breastfed or bottle fed, the questions are the same. Is he getting enough milk? Am I making enough milk? Am I mixing this formula right? Is it too hot or too cold? Is she drinking too much? Is his poop supposed to be this sticky, this color, smell like this? How many wet diapers should she have in a day?

The questions don't end: Is this grunting normal? Is my baby constipated? What if he doesn't poop for a week, or three times a day? Should I call the doctor, my mom, the midwife? Will they laugh at me?

As babies get used to being earth-side, grow rotund and babbly, the questions keep coming. If I feed her cereal will she sleep through the night? When can he start solid food? Can I make my own baby food? How much does a baby eat in one sitting? Will this make her allergic to certain foods? Can I make him fat?

By the end of baby's first year you have asked more questions, read more articles, sought more advice about, and put more thought into what your baby has eaten in his first 365 days than you have in the last two decades of your own life. And you're just getting started.

Ask the parents of a two year old tyrant who physically cringe when you suggest taking the family out to a restaurant. Or a mom who is in a panic about her vegetarian daughter's protein intake. Do you know how to feed a young athlete for maximum performance? What exactly does the school mean by "eat a good meal and get a good night's sleep" in the notice announcing the onset of standardized testing? Is there such a thing as "brain food?" Have you been to the school's cafeteria lately? (Bring back any horrible memories?) Do food dyes contribute to hyperactivity? What about ADHD and kids on the Autism spectrum? How much of that lovingly prepared organic, preservative-free lunch that you packed gets traded every day for gummy worms and spicy Doritos? (Since seven year olds don't know about "lying by omission" he will have no guilt or remorse about trading the hummus and pita chips you packed in his lunch box for his friend's Oreos or donuts. You didn't ask, he didn't bring it up. He gets Oreos. It's a win-win.) What happens when all of her favorite foods are on the "no" list after she gets braces? Are sweets and sodas really contributing to that tween acne? He wants to "bulk up" because he's tired of being skinny. What should he eat? She's worried about "thigh gaps" and won't eat anything that isn't pureed. Speaking of puree, smoothies are healthy, right? Are you supposed to cook every night? What will you eat on late nights when there are practices/rehearsals/auditions /performances/clubs/playoffs/award ceremonies? When can you teach a kid how to cook? Are they safe with knives? Why won't some kids eat vegetables? How will they learn to shop for food, or feed themselves? What happens when he goes to college? Will she set herself up for a life of heart disease by living on delivery pizza and burgers? Will the "Freshman Fifteen" grow to be 30 or 50 pounds of excess weight by the time he is 30?

See? It doesn't end.

Even grandparents weigh in about what and how their kids are feeding the grand kids. In this instance, I was lucky. Good or bad my mother followed my lead when it came to my new-mommy edicts regarding feeding the babies. As my first breastfed baby transitioned to an organic, homemade, vegetarian solid food diet, all was blissful and beautiful. Right up until the day I walked in to him gnawing on a pork chop bone as he sat proudly in his highchair next to his PaPa who was eating pork chops. Some new moms I know would have lost it at this blatant

infraction to their dietary marching orders; however I saw something bigger than my wants. I saw a grandfather bonding with his grandson, and a kitchen full of joy and laughter.

So the question is obvious, and no one wants to ask it, especially after the kid is already here and you're in the seat of responsibility. The powers that be have sent you home with your baby, and now at 2 days, 2 months, 2 years, 12 years, 21 years, you are still asking the same question.

How *DO* you feed a kid?

If the answer was simple, you wouldn't be reading this. But that doesn't mean it is necessarily difficult, just multilayered because as you have surely figured out by now, no two kids are the same. Even identical twins can have different eating habits and preferences, so there is no pat answer to the question. Instead, assuming you know your children fairly well, I'm breaking this book up into specific topics or challenges that are fairly common. You can read through the book and gain a lot of insight into feeding not just one kid, but many, or you can troubleshoot by skipping to the topics that seem most interesting or relevant to your kid. If you are in the crux of the drama of the "Dinner Dilemma" or on the verge of pulling out all of your hair on a nightly basis because of your "Picky Eater," you may want to focus on that section, and then target the other chapters as skills to build upon. In the back you'll find quick, easy recipes that are actually tested by real parents on real kids - and approved.

Rest assured you can do this. You have only two jobs: make nutritious meals and provide them at regular feeding times. That's it. Let's get started.

Picky Eaters

Raise your hand if this is the first chapter you flipped to. You are not alone! The number one complaint I hear from parents is, “He’s a picky eater.” In fact, picky eating is so prevalent, some studies report up to 50% of kids under six have been labeled picky here in the U.S. (Emmett et al., 2018; Wolstenholme et al., 2020)

I’ve led an after school class called Cooking and Nutrition for several years now. My kids range from PreK to 6th grade and twice a week we explore a wide range of interesting foods. I conduct cooking demos at Boys and Girls clubs, YMCAs, preschools and all manner of youth-related organizations. I’ve cooked with and for thousands of kids and go home every night to cook for my own children. If I had a dime for every time I’ve seen a parent stare with gape-mouthed shock when they saw their child eating a certain dish we’d made together I’d be a wealthy woman. “I can’t believe you got her to eat beets!” “He never eats zucchini at home.” We don’t generally cook meat or sweets in my class; we focus on vegetable dishes. Parents have called me a broccoli-whisperer. I proudly boast “getting kids to eat their vegetables” as my super power.

While I bask in that glory, the reality is I’m not doing anything special. You can also win at this game.

There are three things you need to know.

1. Your role as a parent is to provide nutritious foods at set meal times. How much and what she chooses to eat from the choices you provide is not your job, it’s hers.
2. Kids eat what they grow, cook, or are invested in. If you let little Santiago choose the green vegetable of the week and invite him to help prepare it, he is more likely to taste it (most of the time).
3. It’s a long-term game. You may not get a green vegetable into your kid every night, and that’s ok. If you sum up what your child has eaten during the duration of the week and it averages out to be a balanced pattern, you’re doing just fine. If you sum up the meals from the week and you see deficiencies, you can work on those areas as you work to reduce areas of excess.

There are picky eaters, then there are Picky Poseurs. Picky eaters tend to have a legit beef against a food and show consistent behavior like an unwavering dislike of a particular texture or taste. If your son gags every time he tries to eat oatmeal, and he does the same with cream of wheat and grits, then that’s a consistent behavior. He dislikes that texture, regardless of the

taste. Picky eaters often have a sensitivity to particular textures, smells or flavors that will turn them off of specific foods. The reaction is pretty strong and unwavering.

Before we delve into all manner of Picky Poseurs, those so-called “Picky Eaters,” I want to pause and acknowledge the correlation between food aversions and food allergies, sensitivities and undiagnosed medical issues that are tied to food. Kids with food sensitivities, allergies, and undiagnosed illnesses that are food related (like Crohn’s disease, lactose intolerance or gluten sensitivities) will often present as picky eaters because certain foods make them feel bad. Even though they may not have the wherewithal to explain it, their little bodies know it and so they avoid certain foods, and unknown foods which could cause the uncomfortable physical reaction.

It is important to listen to your child. If you think they are picky, ask more questions to find out what is it that makes them picky. If foods cause bloating or gas, skin reactions, recurring constipation and/or diarrhea, or makes your child’s lips, or mouth or throat “feel funny,” then it’s worth talking to your child’s pediatrician to investigate food allergies/sensitivities, or other undiagnosed issues. When children go undiagnosed with certain diseases, or avoid a broad spectrum of foods, there is a greater chance for malnutrition and we want to see all of our beautiful babies thriving.

Here are some examples of how reactions to foods were indicating bigger issues:

- A 12 year old girl who was labeled a picky eater was gradually eating less and less. Eventually she started having horrible stomach cramps and had to use the restroom frequently at school due to diarrhea. Her mother thought maybe the girl’s menstrual cycle was starting, but when she presented bloody stools, the mother rushed the girl to the emergency room. Unfortunately the doctors there thought the girl had a stomach virus, but a week later she was admitted to hospital because her symptoms had worsened and she had stopped eating altogether. After a series of tests and scans, the girl was diagnosed as having diverticulitis. When the doctor showed the mother some of the results from the scans it showed how ulcerated her digestive system was. Her body had been reacting to the foods she was eating for months, possibly years. The girl’s pickiness was an unchecked sign of not wanting to eat foods that made her feel bad. Seemingly healthy foods that are high in fiber like fruits, vegetables and whole grains; red meats; and milk and cheese could all have exacerbated her condition. Even in her recovery she was reluctant to eat because months of stomach cramps, vomiting and diarrhea had made her leery of food. Her doctors suggested a slow, steady recovery diet to give her time to heal and build back her confidence without setbacks.
- A second grade boy was diagnosed with Celiac disease after being labeled picky most of his life. He had self-limited his diet and his parents assumed he just didn’t like a lot of stuff. He was sort of an anomaly in a family that ate a lot of good food. But somehow his little body had figured out that different foods contributed to bad breath and foul smelling

stools, frequent stomach aches and bloating, so he just stuck with those few foods that didn't set him off.

- An 18 month old boy loved his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He ate one every night before bed time. And even though he was an extended breastfeeder, he kept sinus and upper respiratory issues and seemingly stayed on a course of antibiotics. Finally his mother started eliminating foods like wheat and dairy, but it didn't occur to her to eliminate the peanut butter because in her knowledge a peanut allergy presented huge anaphylactic symptoms like hives and throat closures. When the boy turned two years old, his pediatrician suggested a blood draw for allergy testing, and wouldn't you know it... He was allergic to peanuts. Once peanuts were removed from his diet, his upper respiratory issues resolved.

There are real kids, and I'm using their stories just to illustrate how food struggles with kids can be tied to larger health issues.

It is also important to note that developmental delays can impact a child's willingness to eat a broad spectrum of flavors and textures. Children with behavioral issues will often use food as a realm where they have control which can also present as pickiness. And children with sensory issues often have strong food preferences or aversion, or sensitivity to smells, textures or even colors. What we're going to talk about in this chapter aren't any of those scenarios. We're going to focus on pickiness as a behavior that children have learned.

At the end of a cooking demonstration that I did for the staff of a state university, a woman stood up and asked me what to do about her picky daughter. "She only eats chicken nuggets and french fries."

"Really?" I asked. "How old is she?"

"She is six and she is super picky. I can't get her to eat anything."

"So at six she grabs the keys, drives to McDonalds, and buys chicken nuggets and french fries? With what money? How does she see over the dashboard?"

The woman was silent for a minute. "OK yes, I buy her the chicken nuggets," she admitted.

I asked, "Does she eat any vegetables?"

"Oh yes! She loves green beans, and broccoli and collard greens."

I chuckled and said, "Ma'am, if your six year old will eat green beans, broccoli and collard greens, she is definitely not picky. If a six year old will eat all of those green vegetables she's a good eater. Green vegetables are the most challenging to get kids to eat." (Read why in the

“The Bitter Truth About Green Foods” chapter.) I continued, “Her problem isn’t being picky. Her problem is *you* stopping by McDonalds and feeding her chicken nuggets and french fries.” The audience laughed lightly and the woman nodded and sat down.

Afterwards, the woman came down to the stage where I was packing up. She said, “You know, I was mad at you for a minute. I really was! But what you said is true. I’m the one giving her unhealthy food. When I give her healthy food she eats it right up.”

Some kids “act” picky because it gets them attention (negative attention is still attention). Or they’re bored. Or it’s their “claim to fame,” and they have embraced it as part of their identity. Or they have too many food choices (constant access to cereal in the cupboard, yogurt in the fridge, and fruit on the counter, so why eat dinner?). Or they know another kid who is picky and they’re emulating that behavior. Some kids are picky because their parents are lousy cooks (be honest with yourself). Some kids are picky because their parents enable that behavior, have labeled them as such and allow them to act that way. Picky Poseurs aren’t really picky eaters, though. They’re just kids trying to map out their world and the adults in their lives are getting in the way.

Filmmaker Laurie David has two books that offer incredible suggestions on how to get your family back to the dinner table, as well as a trove of family friendly recipes by chef Kirstin Uhrenholdt. “*The Family Dinner*,” (2010) and “*The Family Cooks*” (2014) are solution oriented, addressing many of the issues families face trying to get healthy, delicious meals on the table. I recommend them as part of a library of family-centered cookbooks.

I was honored to contribute to *The Family Cooks* in a chapter dedicated to picky eaters. It’s interesting to note that the title of the chapter is in quotes. David wrote, “Perhaps the quotation marks around this phrase tipped you off to my politically incorrect point of view on this thorny topic.” Both David and I believe that “picky eater” is an expression that is a unique product of 21st century American families. “I really do believe that for the most part, picky eating is a modern American expression used to label a behavior that in your grandmother’s time would have been widely ignored,” David wrote.

Of course this doesn’t include food allergies and “legitimate sensitivities,” but we are speaking directly to the natural reaction to children experiencing new foods and the tendency of tired, stressed, hurried, frustrated, guilty parents to rush to the conclusion that their children don’t like certain foods.

Maybe if parents knew better how kids process the experience of tasting something new, they would be less likely to call kids “picky” and express more patience for the learning process. So let’s back up for a second and look at what happens when kids encounter a new food for the first time. I call this the Eggplant File.

The Eggplant File

Imagine your four year old as a mostly blank desktop screen with just a few files on it. Files labeled with familiar titles like Family, School, Friends. Then you introduce an eggplant to your child. A new file pops up on the desktop, labelled "Eggplant." The file is empty because she doesn't have any information about eggplant yet, besides the fact that it looks neither like a plant nor like an egg, so she is already suspicious.

You cook the eggplant - grilled with miso glaze - and it doesn't look like anything she recognizes. If she is brave (and trusts you) she might take that experimental bite just to see what the fuss is about, and at that first bite she realizes this is a new thing; something unrecognizable. Definitely not a chicken nugget. If she doesn't take a bite it is also because that thing is unrecognizable and therefore possibly not "food." That information goes into the file: unrecognizable; not food; don't eat it, it could be lethal.

Perhaps the next time you get an eggplant you make eggplant parmesan. Now it smells kind of familiar; like pizza or spaghetti. It has cheese on it. Cheese is good. This time she may take a bite, and if she does some familiar tastes register: basil, tomato sauce, parmesan. And then there's that weird unrecognizable thing again. So that information goes into the file: kinda like pizza, I like cheese, definitely not chicken, Dad really likes it.

The third time you get an eggplant you make baba ganoush, a savory dip, because you read kids like to dip and perhaps when paired with some pita bread, you can get her to eat this food. Now, she looks at this mush you claim is eggplant and it looks absolutely nothing like the eggplant you served up before. This time, she won't even try it. You must be losing your marbles, because clearly this isn't the same food you called eggplant on previous occasions. So she updates the file: "don't trust eggplant, it's a shifty term Mom uses to try to trick me into eating things."

At this point, she may put a hold on all things eggplant related because you obviously don't know what you're doing and she's doing just fine not eating it all these four long years of her life. She may not agree to re-open the eggplant file for some time, having made the mental note that eggplant is bad.

And so it goes, each time she is exposed to eggplant (or any new food) more information goes into the file. Different children have different risk tolerance, so one child may get enough information in the file to decide "I like eggplant" or "I don't like eggplant" while another child is still refusing to eat it because he hasn't gained enough information to be confident about it. After all, ingesting strange substances can make you sick or kill you. Dramatic, but not untrue.

It's unfair of us, as adults, to expect a four year old to know if they immediately like or dislike something at first taste. Some kids with some foods may take some processing. It's foreign. A new texture, like avocado. A bold, yet intriguing after taste like blue cheese. A new aroma like balsamic glazed brussel sprouts. And it could take 15-20 exposures before a child feels like they have enough information to make up their mind. If they like it, they usually tell us right away. My

daughter was quick to say “I yike eeet!” when introduced to new foods as a toddler. She was just as quick to spit something out too. And when she did, I’d think to myself, “Well that’s one more note for the Eggplant File.” I wouldn’t conclusively say she didn’t like it, even if she made a dreadful face and started spitting. All of that is a normal reaction to something new, questionable and under investigation. Encouraging this food exploration can actually be one of the really fun parts of feeding a kid.

All of that is great, but when you’re a busy parent already stressed out and short on time and money, you don’t have the patience or the resources to prepare foods that aren’t going to be eaten. And *that* is where the seed of the dinnertime drama is planted. You have lost your focus. Remember, your role is to provide meals composed of nutritious options. Her role is to determine how much she will eat and what she will select from the nutritious foods you provided at mealtimes.

If you are forcing your agenda of “eat all of this,” “like what I like,” “eat however much I give you,” you are setting up layers for power struggles. If you determine that your child’s opinion doesn’t matter, don’t be surprised when he thinks your opinion doesn’t matter either. Turn around is fair play. It is perfectly OK if your son doesn’t like squash casserole. You can still enjoy it, and if the other options presented at dinner time are nutritious (baked chicken, salad, wheat roll), he can still have a nutritious meal if he takes his one taste bite of squash and eats the rest of his food.

What you don’t want to do is lay booby traps for power struggles where your stubborn child finds a foothold to push back against your wishes. Ideally mealtimes will be pleasant, but some days just a neutral experience will do - a meal where the food gets eaten and we get on with the evening. You have to remember your role: provide nutritious options at set meal times. And not get sidetracked by the temptation to control the meal, who eats what and how much. I get it. It’s *super* annoying when my eight year old son won’t even *try* the lasagna I made and that I *know* is delicious. But if he will eat the kale salad that accompanies it, along with some garlic bread, well then fine. I’ll take it. Let’s keep it moving.

Tips to Resolve the Picky Propaganda:

Is it Good?

The first that needs to be addressed is: Is the food you’re serving good? Be honest. Would *you* eat this with relish and enthusiasm? Are you a lousy cook? If so, why do you expect your child to eat your cooking? If it’s not good to you, it’s really not going to be good to your kids who have more taste buds than you do - taste buds that are more sensitive at picking up subtle compounds and flavors. If you think it’s bland, they might think it’s dreadful. Or, as in the case of some green vegetables, you may think broccoli raab has a pleasant bite, but they think it is trying to kill them with bitterness.

Also don't forget kids have very sensitive palates. They like and enjoy flavor and pick up on nuances our old, tired taste buds may miss out on. So consider the quality of your cooking. Can you improve the texture or the appearance of your dishes? Do *you* even like your cooking? Because if not, how can you expect someone else to?

One of the things I appreciated after my second son was born was the Sprouts baby food line. Developed with celebrity chef Tyler Florence, these simple baby food purees used herbs and spices to enhance the flavors of their fruits and vegetables. Blanched green peas were paired with mint. Roasted sweet potatoes were paired with cinnamon. This was how I prepared food for my own baby, not the jarred stuff that tasted like glue.

Fast forward six years and the baby food market had exploded. Now Gerber, Plum, Amy's Organics and a host of other baby food makers were not only adding herbs and spices, but combining colorful vegetables, tropical fruits and whole grains. My daughter's favorite prepared baby food contained mango, sweet potato, rice and vanilla.

What's great about this is that children grow up with *flavor* and they expect their food to be tasty and nuanced. So if you're serving up bland and boring you can expect it to be rejected. Kids have exquisite taste buds and they love flavor, layers and interest in their food just as much as adults, maybe more so because they still have the ability to enjoy simplicity and the pure experience of a thing.

Flavorful doesn't necessarily mean spicy, salty or sweet. Flavorful doesn't even have to be heavily seasoned. More importantly, focus on the quality of your ingredients because good, fresh food, even simply prepared, can be delicious. Let's use cauliflower as an example because it is often dismissed out of hand for being tasteless and therefore needing to be drowned in cheese sauce or butter. Frozen cauliflower in particular is just a big squishy sponge. Serving that for dinner can be an uphill battle. But if you roast fresh cauliflower in a high-heat oven (tossed with a bit of olive oil and sea salt), the natural sugars in the cauliflower are concentrated as the water in the vegetable evaporates. This improves the texture, makes the flavor more complex and rids the cauliflower of some of the bitter/sulfuric compounds inherent in cruciferous vegetables. In this case, the selection of a fresh versus frozen product and the preparation of the vegetable was all that had to be changed. This same simple roasting technique makes for absolutely enjoyable broccoli, brussel sprouts, root vegetables and winter squash.

Labels

Paisley is five. She and I just finished cooking a sausage, kale and white bean soup together. We're eating our soup, sharing it with Paisley's grandmother and another class attendee at a local library. Paisley is *killing* this soup, down to the last drop in her cup. Her grandmother, who has been wholly impressed by Paisley's cooking today, is in awe because apparently Paisley is a "picky eater." I suggest to Paisley's grandmother that she's not picky, she's five. And she's just getting started on her food journey, so relax and enjoy the ride. "How?" her grandmother asked.

“I’m worried she doesn’t eat right, or eat enough of the right stuff because she’s so picky.” My response was, “The first thing you have to do is stop calling her picky.”

Clearly Paisley isn’t *that* picky because she’s eating kale and other vegetables all mixed up with meat in her soup. And she’s devouring it. If she were truly picky, she wouldn’t touch this stuff. The soup was delicious and Paisley was involved in the prep. Why wouldn’t she eat it?

Resist the urge to label your child as a picky eater. Even if she *is* a picky eater, just erase that phrase from your mouth. Young people spend years carving their identities, and if you label them, you remove the options they have to explore the alternative. All children can be picky at some time or another. Explore with your child what it is she does and doesn’t like and *why*. Sometimes unpacking that *why* is more rewarding as you both will learn more about her and her world, her assumptions and her perceptions.

To answer the grandmother’s question more thoroughly, if you remember your job of providing nutritious options and meal times, then whatever she eats is bound to balance out.

Too Many Choices

The most common mistake well-meaning caregivers make is overwhelming little people with too many food choices. I’m not saying you have to keep it boring and eat the same thing all the time. But consider that you’ve been on this planet for several decades and have had time to work out your likes and dislikes. Your preschooler? Not so much. Five years is just a drop in the bucket! Yes, you want to offer healthy choices and introduce new foods. But you don’t want to overwhelm your child with too many “strange” offerings at a time. You may be sick and tired of eating broccoli, but if your little one is willing to eat it every day, is that really a problem? No, not as long as it is part of a balanced diet. If you swap out her beloved apple sauce for beet hummus she may develop some trust issues when it comes to you and these “Hey let’s try something new!” moments. This is also tied to your child’s temperament. You have to know your kid. Some people are natural risk takers, and others are super cautious and like to stick with what they know. Both can still be healthy eaters. Too many choices presented at one time can be overwhelming as well. Some kids will stride confidently up to an all-you-can-eat buffet like an explorer set for new lands, while other kids stare in horror unable to discern the “safe” and known foods from all the dishes presented. For that kid, less is more, just make sure their choices reflect a balanced diet.

Binges

We know little kids are prone to food jags where they really like one thing, and eat it hardily. It can be unnerving when *all* your child will eat is yogurt with blueberries, but they are treacherous little folk, and a food jag can end as suddenly as it began. Then the child who appeared to live wholly on yogurt and blueberries now can’t stand it and will refuse to eat it. Yesterday’s favorite green beans are now the scourge of the earth. My, how quickly the tables turn.

Try to stay flexible and roll with the punches. Continue to offer a variety of healthy foods, and let your child determine which item they'll eat and how much they'll eat. While your child is on a binge, make sure you're selecting the best choices available to you. If the yogurt is low fat/low sugar and the blueberries organic, and if that's all your little love is going to eat for a few weeks, you might as well invest in the best ingredients you can get. See if you can get small amounts of other foods paired with that tried-and-true favorite food item to help round out their meals. You can also offer the favorite food at the *end* of the meal to encourage your little one to eat other things.

Framing New Foods as an Experience

When introducing new foods, spoon up just a bite or two for a fun taste test along with some favorites you know will be palatable choices. Lavish lots of praise for trying new foods, and ask sincerely what your child likes or doesn't like about it. Try to tease out descriptive words by asking about the texture, the taste, and the appearance of the food. The goal here is to build up confidence in your little one so that they're willing to try strange foods, and they are engaged in the process of mindful eating. A side-benefit is it makes for fun dinner time conversation, and you may be able to coax a few more bites into your little busybody. Try to keep the tone positive and introspective instead of critical. For example, if your four-year-old says the sauteed spinach is "yucky," ask what makes it so. "How does it taste to you? How does it feel in your mouth?" If she says it makes her teeth feel "fuzzy" you can drop some science about how spinach is high in calcium and that's what's causing that feeling. Calcium is also good for strong bones and teeth. That little nugget of knowledge may help her push past the weird feeling in her mouth and encourage her to eat more spinach. Probably not, but it's worth a shot! Helping your child explore her vocabulary will help improve table talk beyond "ew," "gross," and "yuck." And remember the praise, "Thank you for trying something new. I'm very proud of you. Maybe we will try it again in a different recipe at another time."

Know your Role, Play your Position

It's your job to offer nutritious foods at every meal. Developing a taste for something can take up to 12 exposures, so don't feel bad if your garlicky kale doesn't make the cut the first night you serve it (or the 5th, or the 10th). Think about how many adults eat foods they once hated as a child. I know I didn't like tomatoes or mushrooms when I was small, and I practically eat them every day now. Once, after a demo that featured roasted beets with elementary aged kids, I asked the teachers in the room about the foods they didn't like as children. They shared some common ones like Brussel sprouts, mushrooms and onions. And one teacher shared that she never liked beets - until today! And she was surprised how much she liked them! I've served fresh okra stewed with tomatoes and tarragon to adults who had sworn off okra since being little kids, and who were astonished by how much they liked it now that they were grown up and it was presented in a different way. So all of that to say, it may take years -- decades -- before your child decides she likes something prepared a certain way. Your job is to just keep offering nutritious options, so that no matter what she chooses, you know it's good for her.

Win the War at the Store

Another way to make the healthy options easier is to stop buying snacks that are going to be the focus of a power struggle. If there aren't any Gummy Worms in the house, then you can't fight over them. Buy snacks you feel good about and put them where your kids can access them like the lower shelf in the refrigerator or lower cabinets in the kitchen. So even while you want to regulate mealtimes, more or less, some days your kids may just want a snack. If your child is snacking on string cheese and grapes are you really upset? Sure she may not eat as much at the next meal, but you know she's getting nutritious foods throughout the day. So skip the chips and snack cakes and opt for yogurt, fruit, nuts and dips like hummus when buying snacks at the grocery store. Refer to the MyPlate Diagram at www.choosemyplate.gov to keep nutritious snacks in mind. Even a peanut butter and jelly sandwich can be a nutritious snack if the peanut butter (a protein) is all natural without added sugars, the "jelly" is a fruit preserve (fruit) and the bread is whole wheat (grain). Serve with a few carrot sticks (vegetable) and a glass of milk (dairy) and you've hit every food group on the MyPlate Diagram.

Keep it simple

Young children in particular may not be fans of casseroles and foods that are "all mixed up." I often hear things like, "That's too much stuff," or "I like rice, but not with all that stuff in it," and the ever-popular "I don't like my food to touch." Your child may actually enjoy cooking with you in the kitchen, but that doesn't mean he is going to enjoy eating what you prepared if the meals are complex. Remembering the layout of the MyPlate diagram can help you build a meal focused on a lean protein, whole grain, a fruit, a vegetable and dairy - and not necessarily all in one dish! If your child skips the whole grain at breakfast, offer another at lunch or dinner. Now that my kids are in school, I realize their packed lunches are really carbohydrate heavy, including whole grains, natural fruits and dairy, and other "healthy" snacks that contribute natural and refined sugars. So I don't focus on carbohydrates so heavily at dinner. There isn't bread served just for the sake of serving bread. If my son eats some steak, kale and mushrooms and he's full, that's ok with me because I know he's had plenty of carbs throughout the day.

Electronic Free Zone

Turn off the TV and leave electronic devices on the sidelines during mealtimes (that means no phone, Dad!). Studies have shown the powerful influence commercials for fast foods and junk foods and sugary beverages have on young people. So imagine that you serve up a delicious, healthy meal and it gets flatly rejected because a burger commercial comes on and now your six year old is throwing a tantrum at the table because she wants fries and a milkshake. Also, electronics are a distraction during mealtimes that can prolong the meal unnecessarily. The delicious hot food you presented cools to a tepid pile of neglected mush while everyone stares at a screen. Ideally, if we're hungry, we will dig in with gusto, eat our food and get on with our lives, but once the food gets cold, the aromas have faded and a few bites have been had, it's easy for our young ones to get "picky." The appetite has been somewhat tempered by a couple of forkfuls of dinner, so now the complaining kicks in.

Online ads target school aged kids and young people through their teen years. So if your tween or teen is binging on YouTube videos they're also being bombarded with advertisements. Avoid all that, by taking electronics out of the equation during meals. Focus on the food and each other. Encourage conversation. You can simply listen in as your kids talk. It's pretty hilarious listening to kid-lead conversations. For the majority of their days kids are told where to be, what to do, and when to speak, so letting them let loose at dinner is a good way to dial in on where their heads are and to get in some quality bonding. Dinner doesn't have to be an hour-long affair. Let's face it, if you get a good 10 minutes of actual eating time in, you've done good! So keep it light, focused on the meal and the company, and keep it moving.

Diffuse the Bomb

We all have foul moods. And with kids, most of their day is spent at school where other people tell them where to be, how to act, and when to speak. Kids don't really have as many acceptable outlets for bad moods, which seem to crop up with increased frequency in the tween years as adolescence approaches. They also haven't learned many of the coping mechanisms we adults have adopted to deal with uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and emotions in an appropriate way. Unfortunately that means the grumpy, irritable, frustrated, moody storm cloud that is your kid will eventually show up at the dinner table in a foul mood. Here you are expecting a peaceful family meal, but your tween/teen is having none of that. The food you presented could've been cooked and hand delivered by angels, but *this* meal is going to go under fire as inedible, boring, and gross and your tween/teen is going to pick a fight with a sibling, a parent, or invisible forces in their head before the meal is done.

In a case like this, diffuse the bomb. You can't *make* a kid eat. If he isn't hungry, if he is destroying morale, if he is being a distraction and a stormcloud of negativity, dismiss him. "Go. Please, leave the rest of us to enjoy our meal." You can always circle back around after dinner and try to have a heart to heart talk, but let the mealtime be what it's supposed to be - a time for everyone to come together and eat. Sometimes a kid just needs a few minutes in his room to work it out, or shoot some hoops to burn off some steam, or call a friend to get some camaraderie. Maybe the dinner table isn't the place for talk therapy if your patient is being belligerent, and if it works against your basic meal time goals.

Be Reasonable

While our daughter was in her toddler years, we didn't eat out much. Definitely not at peak restaurant times like 7 p.m. on Friday or Saturday night. And definitely not food served in courses. Why? Because she was a toddler and it's dreadful going into a busy restaurant with a hungry almost-two-year old at the end of her day. She doesn't want to sit in a high chair. She doesn't want to wait for her food. And guess what? I don't blame her! I also don't want to spend an hour passing her back and forth between my husband and myself while one or the other of us tries to eat our food that is rapidly getting cold or keeping her from knocking over glasses of water while she fidgets and squirms. I also don't want to entertain her with my phone because she will randomly drop it into her noodles or call half my contact list. I don't want to schlep yet another bag filled with activities that take up half the table space and that end up not being

played with because she'd rather chew on nasty recycled restaurant crayons or throw her reasonably clean toys onto the questionably clean restaurant floor. I don't want to order food for her that she's not going to eat at my expense. Or do any of the other stuff that comes with taking a toddler to a busy restaurant. We still eat out, but it's usually mid-day and during slow service times at a restaurant where the food comes quickly. She is less likely to be tired and over stimulated by all the stuff that goes on in peak business hours.

I remember juggling one of these kids during their toddler years and as my husband accepted the over-the-table pass of a squirming, whining child, he looked at me and said, "This isn't fun." No it certainly wasn't. And I decided then, "We don't have to do it. Not like this."

Be reasonable about your expectations and adjust them according to the maturity and size of your family. Some people say, "If you never take your kids out they won't know how to act." That's ridiculous. Take your kids out, to places that are kid friendly, at kid friendly times, and kid friendly food and prices. It's sabotage to think your kid isn't going to act like a kid so you have to be the adult and make the adjustment. Eventually, they aren't toddlers anymore (thank goodness) and then it's reasonable to raise the bar on your expectations. While we still have the toddler to contend with, all of our other kids are perfectly well behaved in restaurants and have been since about age four or so (provided it's not late in the evening, and the food comes relatively quickly, and all the right stars are in alignment). This isn't about discipline so much as being a parent who is aware and sensitive and responsive to your child's developmental stage.

Taste Buds

Taste receptors in our taste buds help us distinguish sweet, salty, sour and bitter, and umami, which can best be described as "savory." Our taste buds are designed to keep us alive. They tell our brain whether or not to swallow what's in our mouth. Babies come hard-wired to like natural sweetness (as in breast milk, not chocolate milk) because those natural sugars are brain food. So your sweet tooth has a primal purpose. Bitterness, on the other hand, tells your brain that something could be poisonous. If you love salty snacks, it's not a personality flaw, it's because sodium is a necessary mineral for our muscles and nervous system. You're just following your instincts when you reach for those chips.

Taste is subjective. Everyone doesn't have the same number of taste buds. Some people are supertasters so greens will be extremely bitter, and many deserts will be cloyingly sweet. Alternatively some people can't seem to distinguish flavors unless they are brazen, astringent or spicy. Taste is also connected to your sense of smell, and if your nose can't appreciate the aromas of the food, then the taste will definitely fall flat. A person's taste preferences aren't set in stone. They change with exposure, social settings, and even hormonal fluctuations. Taste buds also regenerate. So you accidentally burn your tongue on hot chocolate, you may kill a few, but they will grow back in about two weeks.

Most kids have about 10,000 taste buds, and many adults' taste buds have reduced, so strong flavors can be really intense for kids and not so much for grown ups. Bitterness in particular tends to be tossed into the taste reject pile, and that taste is the result of compounds in many green vegetables, sadly. We have taste buds all about in our mouths, esophagus and even in our stomach. Our stomach also has fat-receptors that send happy signals to our brain (now you see why fried food is so satisfying?). Knowing all of this allows you to use this knowledge to your healthy-eating benefit. Enhancing the natural sweetness in foods (like caramelizing onions or roasting vegetables) can make them more palatable. A bit of cheese (which has umami and contains fat) will send happy signals to your brain. A little pop of salt from parmesan cheese or italian sausage can enhance the flavor of something bitter that might have otherwise been rejected (like kale or broccoli). Here's are some more fun facts about how our tastes change with age:

"A 2002 study at the University of Western Sydney shows that there is a greater density of taste buds in a child's papillae compared to adults that is linked to children having a higher predisposition to sugar. The same study also shows that teenagers have higher anterior papillae density than adults. Around the time children become teenagers, Science Nordic states the "Mass Experiment 2012" study at the University of Copenhagen shows that teens have a decreased interest in sugary tastes. Teenagers portray an increased ability and sophistication in distinguishing between tastes as a result, although they are even less likely to try new foods than very young children." - <https://howtoadult.com/difference-between-taste-buds-adults-kids-27362.html> (Cutler, 2017)

Peer Influence

Eating is a highly social activity for most humans. Peer influence plays a role in food preferences in children as young as two years old. When a preschooler with a strong dislike for a vegetable was seated with peers who had a strong preference for the same vegetable, the preschooler was significantly likely to alter food preferences over time and eventually select the initially disliked vegetable. Peer influence in teens isn't so focused on likes versus dislikes, but is more likely to impact eating behaviors like skipping meals to be thin, dieting, and carb-loading before a sporting event.

Studies suggest that parents/caregivers are huge influencers over their kids' food selections. And that your influence lingers even if you're not present, if your child thinks you'll hear about it later, which can be of small comfort when your child is on a field trip or visiting family. We have to model the behavior we want to see in our children. If you aren't making healthy food choices, she won't either. This also applies to teachers and caregivers. If you want our kids to make good food choices, you have to show them how it's done. So while we're at it, make healthy eating normal. It's just eating. You don't have to drop the word "healthy" every time you eat a fruit or a vegetable, but eat them often and with enthusiasm so our kiddoes can see that this is normal, it's what people do, and they internalize it as a part of their lifestyle.

To be clear, *parents and caregivers are the number one influence on kids' food choices and meal time behaviors.*

Personality Expression and Trends

Childhood through adolescence is spent trying to define oneself, trying on personalities and different behaviors to see if that's who and what you're all about. Food falls right into that experience as well. Some kids find personal expression through their food. Some kids use food to reflect their culture. Some kids use food to craft a new identity altogether.

A well known Korean American chef lamented the shame he felt as a child when his mother sent traditional Korean food in his lunchbox to school. Other kids would tease him about his weird food. But the international food culture in America has flourished, and now when the chef's son takes his traditional Korean dishes to lunch, his schoolmates are jealous. Times have changed and many kids take pride in showcasing foods that reflect their families' cultures and traditions.

Foods have trend cycles too. My third grader forgot to take his lunch to school. I stopped by the grocery store and picked up some sushi. I was completely surprised when I saw three of his classmates also eating sushi. Who knew it was a "thing" in the third grade? Roasted seaweed snacks were a big win in second grade. I wouldn't have predicted that either. And those veggie straws in the Kindergarten class? Like money in the bank. Who knew? When the tween got into anime, ramen became all the rage. As parents we can take advantage of these trendy foods to explore entire cultures and cuisines. We can talk about what makes them good or poor choices, and we can look for ways to incorporate them into our regular diets.

She won't eat meat!

I can't tell you how many exasperated parents have flipped out because their child won't eat meat. It's so incredibly common that I wonder how these parents haven't met each other. Don't freak out. This is totally acceptable. Totally navigable. You can totally have a healthy child that is also not a meat eater. In the scope of things you will have to navigate as a parent, vegetarianism can be easy peasy. So stay calm and read the chapter "Meat-Free Kids" and the chapter on "Balanced Nutrition" for vegetarian swap-outs.

Social Consciousness

When kids start to become socially aware, many of them make life changes that impact what and how they eat. They may want to eat organic produce, support local growers, eat only cage-free eggs, or eliminate animals from their diet entirely. Some really great conversations can be had at this time, as you get to know the person your child is growing into and the causes that she is passionate about. It's also a good time to review basic nutrition, so that if your child is eliminating certain foods, he is still eating a balanced diet. You may want to check out the chapters "Meat-Free Kids" and "Balanced Nutrition" chapters for a nutrition check up.

And Back to YOU

I'm looking back at *you* parents. According to research, you've played a significant role in creating these little monsters. Hopefully you see how your child's position on food may be an extension of her personality, and an expression of her individualism. Or maybe you can see how you've been trying to control the wrong things and, therefore, stressing yourself and everybody else out unnecessarily. Now that you have a little insight into your child's position do you think she is still *truly* picky, or is she gradually learning what it is to be an eater here on planet Earth? Do you think you're ready to work out some strategies to dissolve the dinner drama? If so, flip on over to the "The Dinner Dilemma" chapter to find ways of making family dinners actually enjoyable, and something your family will remember and hopefully continue for a long time to come.

Solving the Dinner Dilemma

Drama.

That's what the family dinner has turned into. Despite your best intentions and efforts, corralling everyone to the table at the same time, and serving up a hot nutritious meal, somehow dinner has dissolved into a tense, unpleasant ritual that leaves you feeling resentful and unappreciated while someone is crying, someone is picking at their now-cold food, and someone is scrolling on their phone.

This isn't what you envisioned 40 minutes ago when you put that chicken in the oven. Yet here you are. How did this meal (and many before it) run off the rails?

I will share how an evening at my house was doomed to fail. Our 8 yr old was home sick for the third day with a virus. Michael stayed home with him, entertained, medicated and cooked for him. The 12 year old had after school orchestra rehearsal, followed by a mandatory parent meeting at 6 p.m. for the orchestra's upcoming trip to Florida. Somewhere between getting off of work and attending that meeting I had to meet my mom to retrieve the toddler and take her home to Daddy who now had his hands full with a high maintenance sick kid and a higher maintenance toddler. I went to the meeting where I met the famished 12 year old who had been at school since 8 a.m. and hadn't had anything to eat since lunch. Afterward we had to stop by the grocery store because no one thought to prepare a preemptive busy-night dinner. The 12 year old scarfed down a honey bun and some hot chips and a bottle of water. The default meal would be spaghetti and meat sauce, which no one really wanted because we eat it once a week, but it was cheap, quick and filling. I called home to let Michael know the dinner plan and he had already fed the toddler some mac and cheese. "Oh good," I thought. "Nobody is starving. I'll have time to make dinner." At 8:05 pm we pulled into the driveway. I spent 10 minutes giving the sick kid and the toddler some attention while Michael took a much needed break. When everyone seemed stable and happy I headed to the kitchen to throw together the dinner. The toddler shadowed me into the kitchen and spied the yogurt I had purchased in the grocery bags. She insisted on eating it, and I let her have it because that meant she would be busy eating yogurt while in her high chair which would allow me to cook. Dinner was ready at 8:45 p.m. on a school night. The sick kid had no appetite. The 12 year old ruined his appetite with his junk food snack. And the toddler was full of yogurt. Who did I rush home to make dinner for again? Why did I even bother stopping by the store? Why did I jump through all of these hoops to put a homemade meal on the table on such a crazy day? I guess I can't be mad, I did it to myself. I had some silly expectation that I "should" make a nutritious, homemade meal. But on days like

this, it would be less stressful for me to adjust my expectations. No one said I had to cook. And for the nutrient value of the meal I could've just picked up a pizza on the way in. They probably would've eaten that!

Dinner vs Family Dinner

On a mid-afternoon phone call, I asked Michael, "Do you have any thoughts on dinner?" His response, "Again? Didn't you ask me that yesterday?" He was joking, but that's exactly what it feels like. Didn't we just do this? Didn't they just eat dinner? The question alone just feels like a drag, and answering it even more so because dinner happens Every. Single. Evening. But dinner doesn't have to be a production. Just nutritious. So let's lower the daily stress of dinner by making a distinction between Dinner, which has to be eaten every night, and Family Dinner which is slightly more of a planned occasion (even if it features delivered pizza).

Family Dinner is more intentional and is set at a time where everyone can attend, and conversations can be had, and there's time to plan and execute and enjoy. Dinner, on the other hand, might just be whatever happens on a busy weeknight. Making the distinction can save your sanity so that you're not trying to produce Family Dinner and all the feels that go with it, on a night when no one has the capacity to fulfill that expectation. On some nights, dinner might just be a get-'er-done experience, but even then it should be nutritious: grab a grocery store rotisserie chicken on the way home, and saute some broccoli and carrots together when you get there. Reheat some leftover rice. 10 minutes and you're done. That doesn't involve the extra steps we've come to expect with the Family Dinner, although you can certainly put some in place. While you're cooking the vegetables, someone else can set the table, empty the dishwasher, or fill up water glasses. And whether this is a fast or formal meal, everyone is still responsible for clearing their plates.

Let's look at some aspects of family meals whether dinner or family dinner that can exacerbate bad mojo when it is time to eat. Consider this chapter a Troubleshooting Guide divided up into common topics that can make up the dinner dilemma. Will all of these topics apply to you and your family? No. Do you need to employ all of these strategies to have a decent meal? No. Find the topic that irks you the most and start from there to build more pleasant meals with your family. For more tips on how and why you should implement family dinner, check out the chapter A Family that Dines Together.

Timing

Sometimes what we want and what is possible don't align. Yes, I heartily support the family dinner, but even I can't pull that off on nights where there is Karate practice or chorus recital. If we're pulling up in the driveway at 8 p.m. when exactly was I supposed to be making dinner? Besides the kids have probably had at least one snack or some fast food between the time we pull up to the house and the hour they got out of school. This means they're not *really* all that hungry and more likely to be picky little food critics when sitting at the table.

On nights like that, I stick to tried and true favorites. Quick foods that I know they'll eat and that are easy to prepare, like chicken quesadillas made simply with leftover chicken and shredded cheese on tortillas. I can make three or four at a time on my George Foreman grill and they can get on with their homework and evening chores. On a night like that, salsa and guacamole count as vegetables! Busy nights also benefit from slow-cooker meals, leftover makeovers and meal prepping. All of which take *planning*. (See the chapter Healthy Eating on a Budget to get some planning tips.) These nights are *not* nights to plan a family dinner or have your feelings attached to the outcome of the meal (like my spaghetti dinner that didn't get eaten).

Certain times of the year are busier than others, like the month of December when all of the school music and dance classes have evening performances; and extra curricular activities get in their last awards, practices and belt tests of the year on weekends; not to mention all of the holiday parties and preparations that take place. If we usually sit down and eat together four or five nights a week, it may look more like two during that time of year. Or one. That one will be a big one, though. Usually on a Sunday. Usually inviting friends and family over. Usually producing enough leftovers to support a couple other meals during the week and saving us from cooking from scratch during a busy season. If you have family dinner less often, but they're more enjoyable, that is still a win.

You have to take a realistic look at your life and plan your family dinners accordingly. I found it easier when they were little and didn't have as many extracurricular activities on evenings and weekends. However studies show that tweens and teens need these "touch points" with their parents even more than smaller children do, so it is worth it to make it a priority. (Elgar et al., 2018) If eating meatloaf, mashed potatoes and broccoli twice a week keeps your kid off drugs and in school, it seems a small price to pay!

Research published in the Journal of Adolescent Health shows that the more frequent family dinners occur, the better adolescents fare emotionally. Frank Elgar, an associate professor of psychiatry at McGill University in Montréal who co-authored the study said the positive effect of family dinners doesn't plateau after three or four a week.

"With each additional dinner, researchers found fewer emotional and behavioral problems, greater emotional well-being, more trusting and helpful behaviors toward others and higher life satisfaction, regardless of gender, age or family economics."

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/24/family-dinner-adolescent-benefits/2010731/> (USA Today, 2013)

For more of the how's and why's behind the Family Dinner check out the chapter "A Family that Dines Together".

Why are you doing this?

Start with the idea that this isn't something YOU are doing. It's something the FAMILY is doing, therefore they have to be involved. If you're already rolling your eyes at the idea of having them involved, then pause and take a look at that. There's something going on in your mind that's bigger than just dinner. In a hectic world where we're all busy, dinner shouldn't come off like *one*

more thing to do. After all, you *have* to eat and so do the kids, so you might as well enjoy it some of the time.

The goal is to create something pleasant, a ritual, where everyone can decompress and share a meal together. It doesn't have to be elaborate or a big deal. What is your real intention for having your family come together and eat? If it isn't something you really want to do, you will end up with the same attitudes and results you've always had. Don't force it just because I wrote a book about it, or some expert said you need to do it, or your co-worker magically manages to pull this off every night. The family dinner has to be something your family is taking on as a lifestyle, and while you may initiate it and even set the ground rules, this is something meant to be done and enjoyed *together*.

Remember your role

You have two jobs as a parent: provide nutritious choices and set meal times. As you consult with your spouse and children, keep that in the front of your mind. When you're planning your menu or meal plans for the week, get input from your family. If your children suggest foods that aren't nutritious choices, those choices go into the "maybe pile." Nutritious choices get the green light. This helps them, and you, learn what food is good for you. Be flexible with this because you may end up with a meal that's sweet potato, green beans and cornbread based on the input from the kids. That's ok though. Roll with it.

Assign positions

There are things that have to happen to get dinner on the table and everyone can play a part. Who is writing the shopping list and doing the purchasing? Who unloads the car and puts up groceries? Who decides what is getting eaten and when (that's you)? Who preps meals? Who does the cooking? Who sets the table, pours the beverages, does the serving? Who is handling clean up. If *you* are doing all of this, then either you have very small children, or you need to delegate.

Ask for volunteers. Children are capable of more than we give them credit for. In the beginning it will take them a long time, and they'll do it wrong (according to you), and they will make messes. That's what children do. Plan for that. Eventually you all will get a rhythm going. My 12 year old is perfectly capable of taking groceries out of the car. He is great at unloading the dishwasher and taking out the trash. My 8 year old can set the table, and get cups, and most of the time he pours well, but there are still occasions when he makes messes. My toddler just throws food on the floor, but her artwork can be used as part of table settings if it keeps her occupied while I cook. I put up groceries because I'm the primary cook and I like to be able to *find* the groceries when it's time to use them. I also load the dishwasher simply because I'm convinced I'm the most efficient when getting the most dishes in there that can still actually get washed. My husband disagrees. But in that I wash more dishes than he does, I'm sticking with my superior technique.

Set the tone

You would be amazed what turning off the TV and turning on a little “dinner music” will do. You don’t have to save ambiance for date night with your spouse. Kids appreciate ambiance too. A bunch of flowers (ok, they’re technically weeds) picked out of the yard makes a lovely centerpiece and gives the toddler purpose. Use some of the billions of pieces of art that come home from school as placemats. Anything you or your kids can contribute to the aesthetics of the meal can be a welcoming gesture that lets everyone feel included. At the very least, turn off electronics (that means no phones Mom or Dad) and breathe in a moment of calm while you sit down to eat.

Expectations

A colleague of mine had dinner at her husband’s boss’ house. The Boss is from Sweden. His children, growing up in America are fluent in Swedish and English but Swedish is almost exclusively spoken in the home. My colleague was astonished by how polite and mannerable the boss’ three daughters, ages 7 to 11, were at the table. She said not only did they set the table and arrange the food, they ate well and conversed pleasantly, cleared the table and washed the dishes. All without being given any instructions. There are two reasons: the children have been taught what to do, and the parents hold an *expectation* that it will happen.

At a parent information session that I facilitated, a mother said her children ages 10 and 12 were never picky eaters. “They ate what I gave them, because that’s what I expected,” she said. “Once my oldest had dinner at a friend’s house and she tried to come back home making all of these special requests. That didn’t work out for her. That’s not how we do it in our house.” Expectations, when reasonable and consistent, lay the groundwork for the attitudes and behaviors at meal times.

This doesn’t just apply to mealtimes. Once, while engaged with a first-grade class, I observed a boy get out of line and his teacher simply explained to him, “We don’t do that in THIS classroom.” It was enough of an explanation of the expectation that the boy got himself together and corrected his behavior. Sometimes setting the expectation, and restating it can be the clear communication that’s needed. “That’s not how we behave at the table.” “We eat vegetables at dinner.” “I’ve prepared a nutritious meal for you.”

OPF: Other People's Food

I didn’t say you have to *cook* dinner or family dinner. I said you have to provide nutritious choices and set meal times. Sometimes I paint myself into a corner when I insist on cooking and when I feel my frustration and stress levels rising, I remind myself, “You don’t have to cook!” Many large grocery stores have grab-and-go dinner solutions. It can be tricky, but you can assemble a reasonably nutritious meal through the fast food drive thru. Take out from restaurants can sometimes take the stress out of answering “What’s for dinner?” And recently meal kits, whether picked up or delivered to your home, have become an affordable solution to getting dinner on the table quickly.

I have developed and contributed recipes to several meal-kit plans and services that take all the thinking out of dinner by packaging the ingredients and chef-inspired recipes for you. Meal-kit services have different personalities. Some deliver nationally with frozen foods that are entire pre-cooked meals. Others deliver perfectly measured ingredients along with a recipe and you get to prepare the fresh foods yourself.

Meal-kits can make cooking fast, fun and adventurous. They can make trying new foods less intimidating and open your family up to exploring new tastes and ingredients. The pre-cooked meals can go right into the freezer for heat-and-eat convenience with a healthy twist. Whether fresh or frozen, meal-kits and meal delivery services can help alleviate dinner time stress and answer the question “What’s for Dinner?” with healthy options.

Make one meal...

You are not a short order cook. Your dining room is not in a restaurant. You want the food to be eaten, so it makes sense to consider your family’s likes and dislikes. However, that can’t look like *you* making a bunch of separate meals to make everyone happy. It also shouldn’t look like you cooking macaroni and cheese every single night because that’s the only thing your son will eat. It’s the only thing he eats *because* you keep making it, and in doing so you’re not teaching him how or what he needs to eat to sustain his health.

This is where getting your kids’ buy in is useful in the planning and prep phases of your week. If you’re making a grocery list or meal plan and you ask your kids questions like “What green vegetables should we have this week?” “Which whole grains should we eat this week?” then your kids can start to take ownership over their contribution to meals. If Cortez adds green beans to the list, they become Cortez’s green beans. And when it’s time to serve them, he gets to wash them, trim them or maybe even saute them. If Courtney says brown rice should be on this week’s menu, then she gets to be a part of measuring, rinsing and cooking the brown rice. It’s Courtney’s rice this week. When the food hits the table, watch your kids beam with pride. Offer and encourage positive comments and support, not criticism, so this gets to be one of the highlights of the week for your kids. Since they’re all involved, it’s a good practice to stay positive. You wouldn’t want your sibling being harsh and critical when it’s your dish that’s on the menu. You may be surprised how willing they are to eat food that they are personally invested in bringing to the table. But also don’t be surprised if after all that smiling all they do it take one bite. I have a son who loves to cook with me, and nibbles when it is time to eat. Just take it one small victory at a time... baby steps.

...but not the SAME meal.

The dreaded “food rut.” When your kids know what’s for dinner before you even get started. “Meatball Monday,” “Taco Tuesday,” “Whatever’s Leftover Wednesday” *again?!?*

Boredom even applies to your sides. Broccoli is one of those vegetables that everyone in my family will eat, but can I tell you how *tired* I am of broccoli? I started offering two or three vegetables at dinner, something that appeals to the kids’ palates and something Michael and I

can enjoy, like grilled asparagus or garlicky broccolini. That way there's something for everyone. Leftovers get eaten for lunch or incorporated into another meal.

Even favorite foods lose their appeal when served up too frequently. You can find time for inspiration by perusing food magazines and websites. Watching cooking channels, if you have the time. Or even taking a fun cooking class on the weekend. (Check out the chapter "Healthy Eating on a Budget" for tips on diversifying your diet and easy meal planning.)

What's for dinner?

This can be a loaded question. Sometimes it's a trigger. You may have a kid that asks that question and *nothing* you say will get a positive response. If that's the case, stop answering the question. Seriously. Ignore that little person because they're playing you. Do not feed the drama. If you know that whatever you respond with is going to be met with whining and complaining just remember your role and tell him, "Wait and see." The mystery alone should prove enough to get him to the table when dinner is ready.

It's an annoying question if you don't have an answer which is why *some* degree of meal planning really is essential if you want to reduce stress around mealtimes. It's so important (yet easy) that I've written a chapter just on meal planning and shopping ("Healthy Eating on a Budget").

Bickering at the Table

Encourage active listening. Also encourage everyone to take turns talking, take turns listening and not dominating the conversation. And if that logical, rational approach doesn't work, see the next tip: New Rule.

New rule

New rule: no complaining, whining, crying, falling out, pouting, sulking or yelling at the table. If a kid can't act like a decent person, she may be dismissed. We're here to eat. Possibly talk. But if that's too much to ask, then she can just go. You've done your part: provided nutritious choices at a set meal time. You're off the clock. Don't get mad. Don't lose your cool. Don't feel any kind of way about it. You achieved what you set out to do.

If you have been in the power struggle of the Dinner Dilemma for a while it may take a while for everyone to get used to the "new" way dinner is done, but they'll come around. You're doing this out of love. You're making healthy choices and setting good examples because you care about your family. Stay positive, be firm, and remember why you're doing this.

Practice Gratitude

You may or may not say grace, but it's a good idea to express gratitude and appreciation for the food you are eating, where it came from and what it is going to do for your body. Not just because it's a lovely sentiment, but also because children who complain often are disconnected. It's easy to complain about what's being served when you've never considered being hungry,

lacking or needing food. It's easy to complain when you don't consider the time and money that went into purchasing and preparing the food. It's easy to complain when you have no connection to the thought that went into cooking the meal.

American Soto Zen master Zentatsu Baker-Roshi wrote the introduction for a book which was written by Ed Brown called *Tassajara Cooking*. It is a very Zen-like guide to the kitchen and cooking vegetables, and in the introduction, Baker gives us a spiritual "big picture" look at where our food comes from and why we should express gratitude. He wrote:

Food is our common property, the body of the world, our eating of the world, our treasure of change and transformation, sustenance and continuation. It is the essence of Buddha's mind and practice, the unfathomable effort of all beings who have brought us this time to eat from the most ancient times, from every world, past and present. It is the countless other creatures that constantly help. It is the water, sunlight, and turning of the earth. It is our absorption of the suffering of the plants and creatures eaten, or displaced or killed by clearing and harvesting. It is cooking and eating, preparation and cleaning, planting and sewage, exchanging and transporting.

Thus our parents and teachers have transmitted their bodies and minds to us to continue the realization of the Dharma this very moment.

Homage to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
and to the countless beings
for this food and teaching.

Dogen-zenji said, "We must care for food as if it is our own eye-sight." And he said, "If one is moved by things and people, one is also able to move them. The pure actions of the cook must come forth from his realization of the unity of all things and beings; and by seeing clearly into the minds and hearts of others, from a leaf of cabbage he must be able to produce a sixteen-foot Buddha." (Brown, 1986)

I don't want you to make a martyr of yourself and give lectures on how laborious those meatballs were to make. That will be met with lots of eye-rolling. But your kids should be aware that breakfast doesn't make itself and magically appear on the table at the crack of dawn every day. It's there because *you* got up and made it. You considered *them* when you were putting blueberries in the pancakes, or chose the high-fiber cereal with dried fruit, or put a pinch of brown sugar in the oatmeal. Your preparing food for them is an act of service, an act of love. And you are able to do it thanks to the work, care and effort of people like farmers, truck drivers and grocery store clerks. You are able to purchase food because you are employed and get a paycheck that you transform into food. All of this is possible because we are interconnected. The nutrients from the soil, water and sun end up in our food and nourish our bodies. When you think about it, it's really amazing. Definitely worth a moment of gratitude.

Musical Chairs

I honestly didn't know seating was an issue until I asked a group of moms about their dinner dilemmas. One of my mom friends said that her three kids fight over who is going to sit where, and next to whom. A second mom friend said if one of her kids refuses to sit next to his sibling. Another third mom friend offered her way of overcoming seating issues:

The boys were fighting over seats, and they were fighting when they emptied the dishwasher together. So now, one kid empties the dishwasher one week, the other the next. They get first choice of seat when they are on dishwasher duty.

Don't you wish you'd thought of that? So simple and efficient. I love it! Another mom said her family has assigned seating which takes the guesswork out of the issues. In my house it's kind of a free-for-all but it never presented as an issue.

Pull the Plug on Power Struggles

If you're focusing on your child's plate, you've taken your eyes off the prize and forgotten your role. How much she eats is up to her. You may want to remind her if she's gotten distracted, but if she's hungry, she'll eat.

If he hasn't touched his broccoli, that's not your problem. You provided healthy choices. It's up to him to eat it. Again, a gentle nudge may be all he needs ("How's that broccoli today?") but nagging is no longer in your job description.

If your daughter's favorite dinner song is "I don't like it," ask her "why?" Have a discussion about it. How would she make those sweet potato fries better? Would it be better with a dip or sauce? What seasonings would make it taste better? Sometimes just experimenting with foods will get a few more bites in her. Meanwhile you're engaging her in conversation and she's analyzing her preferences and considering options she may not have known she has.

Older children will concede sometimes if they know WHY the foods you have offered are good for them. Try dropping a little science and see if you get a more willing eater.

Avoiding Vegetables

If your son doesn't eat vegetables, inform him. Sometimes just knowing something is good for him might get it eaten. I may have exaggerated the benefits of certain vegetables in the past. Carrots won't exactly give you xray vision but they have been linked to eye health and improved night vision. Broccoli won't make you as strong as the Incredible Hulk but I'm sure Hulk eats a *lot* of broccoli. But I have also said, "Eat the mushrooms. They're rich in antioxidants and help protect your cells," and the mushrooms got eaten. It's not just something I say so the food doesn't get wasted. Kids have to learn what to eat for their overall well being as adults, and tying short nutrition lessons to certain foods may increase the likelihood of them eating those nutritious foods. Generally, when one of my kids makes a plate, I expect them to eat all of their vegetables even if they don't finish everything on their plate. Generally, that's what they do and I suppose it's because that expectation has been there all their lives. You don't have to be a nutrition expert. Vegetables are a good source of vitamins, minerals and fiber. Go with that.

Also consider the taste of the vegetables, especially the bitter compounds in green vegetables. And the preparation of the vegetables: overcooked and mushy are much less appealing than roasted or sprinkled with parmesan cheese. Taste is so subjective that I've dedicated an entire chapter to it and ways you can manipulate the flavors of vegetables to get them eaten! ("The Bitter Truth Behind Green Foods")

Pop Goes the Weasel

If you have a child that pops up out of their seat like a Jack-in-the-Box during mealtimes, you may want to talk about mindfulness and being present and in the moment. A trick I use in my Pre-K classes is to ask them to "Check your body. What is your body doing? What is your body *supposed* to be doing?" That impulsive behavior is common in young children, but as they mature, they don't pop out of their seat with every excited thought. Usually, pop-ups happen because the kid has thought of something to say, or do, or something in another part of the house. Acknowledge their excitement and remind them they can see, do, get it after they return to the task at hand: finish dinner and clear their plate. My eight year old is notorious for this behavior and most of the time he pops-up because he's excited about something. Learning to control impulses, finish what you start (dinner), and delay gratification are all part of growing up. Be patient and consistent and remind them to stay in the moment and finish what they started.

New Foods

Children have to *learn* what to eat, and how will they do that if you feed your 15 year old like he's still a 5 year old? Kids need exposure to a wide range of nutritious foods. It doesn't have to be like a cooking show competition where there is an insane mix of crazy new foods every day (don't do that), but they do need to regularly be exposed to foods that may challenge their comfort zones. If you do introduce something new, pair it with a tried-and-true favorite and don't expect anyone to eat much of the new food. It's just about exposure, tasting and having confidence in trying new things.

Be Patient

As a mom-friend of mine once said, "Kids are weird." So true. Give them time to learn your rules, adapt to the flow, get involved and get onboard. You don't have to have all of the answers, but with time you might find your dinner dilemmas dissolve into some nice meals with your family. Meals you'll remember and treasure when they're all grown up. Meals that will give you insight into the types of people they are growing up to be. Meals that are shaping their perceptions and perspectives of their worlds.

A Family that Dines Together

One sunny spring Saturday we added an extra kid to the mix, our 11 year old nephew, who is a chicken wing aficionado. For lunch we went to a place called Wing Spot, a franchise highly approved by the nephew, and owned by a famous local rapper named Rick Ross.

Thank goodness for children. They force the outside world and its trends into my consciousness, whether I welcome it or not. So, this day, we were accompanying two trend-conscious tweens and a desperate to be cool seven-year-old sitting in the restaurant owned by a famous rapper. Not that I could name a single song of this famous rapper, but what did happen was we (the adults) were somehow transported into their world. It started with which flavors to choose for the 50 (yes, *fifty*) piece wing meal we were ordering. Wing flavors have trends, too, apparently. Combos like citrus-pepper-hot and Louisiana-rub-bbq are a “thing.” Ordering plain old mild wings is “lame.” Oh.

Then there was the ambient music - trendy and completely unknown by me. But the kids knew who the artists were and that sparked off a passionate roundtable discussion about people I have never, ever heard of, but people about whom these kids knew amazing details. Album and single sales, hot “bars” and “spittin fiyah,” producers and beatmakers, stolen rhymes and jail time. I couldn’t contribute a mumbling word. Michael and I just stared blankly at one another, eyebrows raised. Me practically licking the creamy-crack homemade ranch dip off of my boring mild wings; Michael mildly impressed with the subtle play between the citrus butter and black pepper combo on another basket.

This was fascinating because normally we (the adults) are driving the conversation and the kids just get in where they fit in or try to keep up. Out of this come many “teachable moments” where we elucidate and illuminate the young malleable minds at our disposal. But in *this* environment the kids ruled and they drove the conversation, pulling us into a vortex of “trash” flow and “lit” rhymes and “savage” beats.

I learned a lot. And every piece of food was eaten, celery sticks and all. There was no cajoling, threatening or begging anyone to finish anything. This was food the kids had chosen (not one piece of me wanted wings for lunch that day), in an environment designed with their generation in mind, playing music they liked. And the kids responded: they opened up, relaxed and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Granted, wings aren’t a hard sell, but they WAY the guys enjoyed the meal impressed me more than *what* they were eating. They were talking, debating, joking and completely engaged with each other while eating (with napkins!) and discussing the food and other stuff that was important to them.

This reminded me (again) about how important it is to eat together as a family, and how a family can develop a positive eating culture around the table.

If you feel like you're having a hard time getting your family to the table, you are not alone. In an article, "The Importance of Eating Together," Cody C. Delistraty examined not only the health benefits that come from a family eating together, but the psychological benefits as well. He set up the scope of this dilemma with:

"... the average American eats one in every five meals in her car, one in four Americans eats at least one fast food meal every single day, and the majority of American families report eating a single meal together less than five days a week." (*The Atlantic*, 2014)

Delistraty cites a study that showed an increase in student truancy from 15% to 30% when students reported they didn't regularly have meals with their families. Additionally, Delistraty wrote:

"Children who do not eat dinner with their parents at least twice a week also were 40 percent more likely to be overweight compared to those who do, as outlined in a research presentation given at the European Congress on Obesity in Bulgaria this May. On the contrary, children who do eat dinner with their parents five or more days a week have less trouble with drugs and alcohol, eat healthier, show better academic performance, and report being closer with their parents than children who eat dinner with their parents less often, according to a study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University." (*The Atlantic*, 2014)

If you were a kid, and most of your day consisted of being told what to do, where to be, what to think, but mealtimes were a chance for your voice to be heard, your opinion debated, your questions answered, you might be more invested in the entire experience. Right? Mealtimes become not just a time to gain sustenance for your body, but also a time to check out of your day and into a safe space where you are seen, heard, considered.

Delistraty looks at how the actual culture of food has shifted from being central and necessary to a sign of excess in American culture.

"In America, it seems snobbish to take time to eat good food with one's family. The Norman Rockwell portrait of the family around the dinner table now seems less middle-class and more haute bourgeois, as many families can't afford to have one parent stay home from work, spending his or her day cleaning and cooking a roast and side of potatoes for the spouse and kids. Most parents don't have time to cook, many don't even know how, and the idea that one should spend extra money and time picking up produce at the supermarket rather than grabbing a bucket of Chinese take-out can seem unfeasible, unnecessary, and slightly pretentious. It's understandable to want to save time and money. It's the same reason that small shops go out of business once Walmart moves into town; but in this case it is not the shop owner who suffers, it is the consumer of unhealthy and rushed meals. This isn't the stuff of fantasy; some Rockwellian artwork or Pinterest inspired day dream. It doesn't have to happen every night, as long as it happens. A meal together. And occasionally, an unhurried, lingering meal where the purpose is to come together intentionally as much as it is to eat."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/the-importance-of-eating-together/374256/> (The Atlantic, 2014)

What if tabletalk was a non-judgemental time where you could work things out, or be irreverent or bring up issues you didn't feel safe to discuss elsewhere? What if instead of the usual prescribed, long winded advice doled out by adults along with the green beans and casserole, kids were engaged (What do you think about that?) and involved (What green vegetable should we have with dinner tomorrow?). What if, instead of "Hurry up and finish," or "Why do you eat so slowly?" kids heard "Thanks for setting the table," or "Nice job cutting the carrots," or "I like the way you arranged the vegetables in the salad." Instead of saying "How did you get a C on that quiz yesterday?" you find yourself saying "Do you feel ready for that quiz tomorrow?" Because you *know* about the quiz in advance, because your kid *told* you about it because you are in the *habit* of discussing each other's lives in a casual, mutually interested, non-invasive way.

So how does this happen? It happens like everything else intentional in life: you plan it. Put Family Dinner on the calendar and inform everyone they will be attending. No excuses. If you want to invite guests, feel free. Your teenager might actually sit at the table longer if his best friend is sitting right next to him instead of haunting his laptop screen and blowing up his cell phone while waiting for him to return from this archaic dining tradition so they can keep gaming unblinkingly through the rest of the evening.

Once the date is set, get the kids involved with planning a menu. It can be as simple as spaghetti and meatballs with a salad and breadsticks. Or as elaborate as a multi course meal with beverages and dessert. I would err on the side of being time-conservative and fun. Your propensity to over plan is part of the reason your family never eats together in the same place at the same time, remember?

Themes like *Kabob Night* or *Pizza Night* let everyone customize their meals to their liking which increases the likelihood that everyone will actually eat. If your family has adventurous palates you can plan your menu based on foods from different countries, and use this opportunity to learn about other cultures. Maybe this is a way for your family to go meatless once a week. This is a great way for your kids to learn about you. Evoke some of your childhood nostalgia by bringing back some of your favorite dishes from your own youth. Explore some of the history and culture of your family with dishes made famous by grandparents or traditional from a distant motherland.

I realized my kids hadn't experienced some of my favorite foods growing up, so I added a "throw back meal" into our rotation for a few days in the month. The shake and bake chicken was a hit, the homemade chicken pot pie was better than anything I'd ever pulled out of the freezer, and the meatballs and gravy is now a regular go-to meal. It gave the kids a glimpse into my own childhood and it was fun.

Whatever you decide, make sure the kids are involved in designing the menu, shopping for ingredients, researching and adapting recipes, prepping and cooking, setting the table, pouring drinks or any aspect that they can be involved in. They don't have to be involved in EVERY aspect, just SOME aspect because this is about inclusion, being a unit where everyone has purpose and adds value.

And once all the work is done, sit, relax, eat. I suggest no electronics at the table and no television on in the background. These things are distractions and the purpose of this meal is to be present for the 10, 20, 30 or 45 minutes that it lasts.

Make this time memorable, intentional and significant. Maybe with some mood music, or an artful centerpiece created by one of the kids, or an heirloom platter that evokes stories of loved ones and fond memories of holidays, or those tacky plastic cups from the Spring Break trip even though most of the wording has faded away.

And here's the important part. Try not to dominate the conversation. Ask questions and listen. Resist the urge to dismiss topics as silly or impossible or ridiculous. Participate and engage, but resist the urge to minimize your kids' experiences with comparisons to your big, important, real adult life. Be a fly on the wall and listen to your kids with both ears as if you just met them, as if they were the most interesting thing going on right now. You don't have to force it, just be present. And you may find some meals are really eerily, uncomfortably quiet and over quickly. Other meals can turn into a raucous hour of hilarity.

Another thing to be mindful of is *your* attitude about food. Are you wrinkling your nose at the fish? Are you pushing the squash over to the side of your plate? Are your portions and serving sizes appropriate? Kids mirror what we do, regardless of what we tell them. So if Dad always leaves his broccoli untouched and Mom reaches for the salt shaker without tasting her food first, those are behaviors you can expect to see repeated in your youngsters.

Finally, just like everyone helped get this meal on the table, everyone helps with the clean up. That can be the last intentional action of the unit this evening. But you may find after the dishes are washed and the food is put away, someone is lingering or wants to go for a walk, play a game together or put on a movie. Sometimes the "feel good vibes" and "happy family mojo" are fierce and everyone wants to keep the happy feelings flowing. That's the good stuff. That's how you know it's working. That's a good time to schedule the next family meal.

Balanced Nutrition

My goal with this chapter is to keep the idea of “Balanced Nutrition” as simple as possible.

There is SO much nutrition and health information floating around, and a lot of the information is contradictory. Government agencies recant previous recommendations. General practitioners have a nominal amount of nutrition education yet have to prescribe treatment for food-related disease. Information from clinical registered dietitians can run opposite of holistic healers. There’s a new trendy diet every year. Are eggs good or bad? Are we still doing the low-fat thing or no? What about high protein, low carb diets? Can you fast your way to good health?

There is a lot of confusion. And if you can’t confidently feed yourself as an adult, how are you supposed to confidently feed your kids?

My Plate

I’m going to use the USDA’s MyPlate diagram as the basis for our conversation on balanced nutrition. Most Americans are familiar with it, kids learn about it at school, and it may even pop up at your doctors and pediatricians offices. The MyPlate diagram is simple to use and apply, without counting any calories or measuring servings, so anyone can do it.

The MyPlate diagram shows five basic food groups: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy.

Fruits include fresh and dried fruits, 100% fruit juices and canned/jarred fruits in 100% juice or water, not syrup.

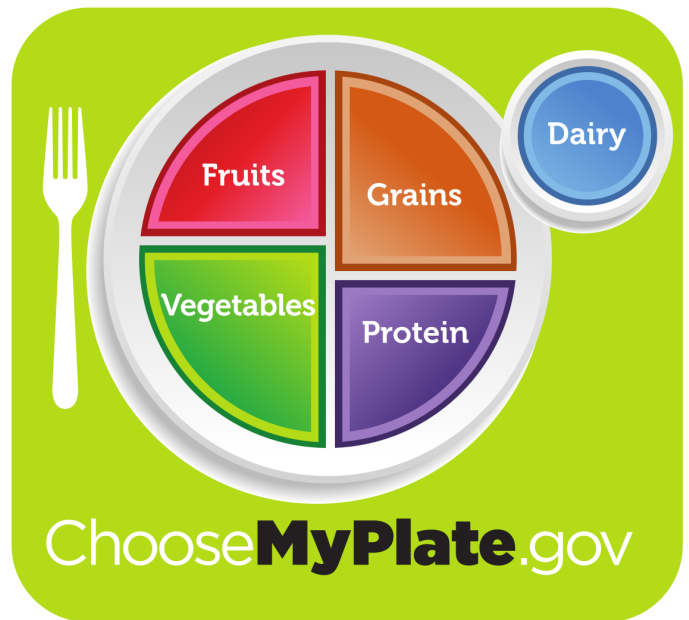


Fig 5: My Plate Diagram www.myplate.gov

Vegetables are practically a “free” food because they are nutrient dense and low in calories. Vary your vegetables by planning to add them to main dishes and entrees. Cut fresh vegetables

for snacks. Frozen vegetables can be steamed for a quick side dish. No Salt Added canned vegetables can be added to casseroles and soups.

Each day strive to make half your grains whole grains like oatmeal, whole wheat pasta and quinoa. Breads and other whole grain foods are considered “whole grain” if the first ingredient on the ingredient label is “whole wheat flour” or “brown rice flour” or “whole corn meal.” Popcorn, corn tortillas, barley and brown rice are also whole grains that you may want to add to your rotation.

Protein foods extend beyond meat, fish and poultry. Protein foods also include beans and peas, nuts and seeds, eggs, tofu and nut butters.

Dairy foods are made from milk and high in calcium. Dairy foods include cheese, yogurt, kafil, and the occasional ice cream.

In an ideal world, you’d get one serving of each of these categories at each major meal of the day. Snacks would be composed of two or three categories as well.

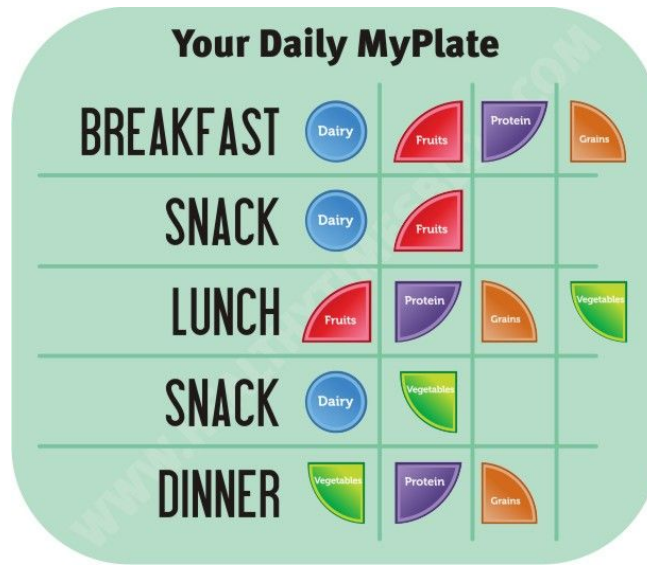
If you’re eating in accordance with the MyPlate recommendations, then this will translate into your meal planning and shopping list as discussed in the Healthy Eating on a Budget chapter. And if you are planning and shopping along the recommendations of the MyPlate diagram, then your shopping cart and home kitchen will reflect the proportions indicated on the diagram more or less. By doing that you kind of automatically set yourself up for success. You are planning, shopping, stocking and cooking foods in the proportions that are recommended for a balanced diet. So let’s take a look and what that actually looks like.

My Plate in a Day

This diagram shows an example of how you can think of your day in terms of the MyPlate recommendations. If you make healthy food choices from each category your day may look like:

- Breakfast: Yogurt (dairy/protein) with fresh strawberries (fruit) and whole wheat toast (grain)
- Snack: String cheese (dairy) with an apple
- Lunch: Salad of mandarin oranges (fruit) with chicken (protein), quinoa (grains) and spinach (vegetable)
- Snack: Milk (dairy) with baby carrots (vegetable)
- Dinner: Roasted broccoli (vegetable), salmon (protein), and whole wheat pasta with herb-butter

You can also use this diagram to mix and match the MyPlate parts to ensure you’re meeting your daily requirements. For example, if you didn’t get the dairy serving in for breakfast, slide it down to dinner. If you ate a vegetable omelet for breakfast, you can move your fruit down to the afternoon snack. Easy, right?



Another thing to keep in mind is that fruits are pretty easy to come by, and most people enjoy them. So when I look at a meal and apply the MyPlate concept, I don't worry about fruit too much. I usually serve fruit for snacks to my kids anyway. So instead of trying to make fruits 1/4 of each meal, I try to make half of MyPlate vegetables: breakfast, lunch and dinner. It can be tricky getting vegetables into breakfast (but not impossible! Frittatas! Smoothies!) so double up on the vegetables at lunch or dinner if you couldn't squeeze them into breakfast. Most vegetables are a "free food" as long as they aren't deep fried, smothered in cheese or dunked in a sweet sauce, so eat up! Vegetables are an excellent source of vitamins, minerals and fiber.

My Plate in a Meal Plan

Start with a basic meal plan, say for three or four days. A seven day meal plan for breakfast lunch and dinner plus snacks is really elaborate and can be overwhelming if you're just getting into meal planning and prep.

Pull three or four dinner recipes that look good and tasty off of the internet or from a cookbook. Add one or two lunch ideas based on your predicted leftovers and stuff you tend to keep on hand like sandwich bread and cheese. Pull a couple of breakfast ideas together. For example: Maybe dinner Sunday will be Baked salmon with smashed new potatoes and green beans. Monday could be Soup and Sandwich night with tomato bisque and grilled cheese sandwiches. Tuesday will be Taco Tuesday with grilled chicken tacos. Wednesday we're eating leftovers.

With this plan in mind, I know there will be leftover chicken, salmon and tomato soup, and I'll make extra green beans and smashed new potatoes by using batch cooking. This will all get used up in my lunch during the week. Breakfast will likely be waffles and bacon on Sunday, and something quick during the week like oatmeal and fruit, yogurt and fruit, and eggs for protein. I also keep the raw vegetables on hand for a salad any given week to add vegetables to any meal.

Now that I've thought it through, I fill in the table below and as I populate the fields make sure I'm getting foods from each food group for my major meals. In this case, I need to round out Sunday which has protein from salmon and vegetables from green beans and new potatoes, by adding a grain: brown rice. I also need to adjust Taco Tuesday which gets protein from chicken, grains from tortillas, and dairy from cheese. I'll add some vegetables with sauteed zucchini and yellow squash seasoned with some smoked paprika.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
Breakfast	Waffles Bacon Fruit	Oatmeal Fruit Boiled Egg	Yogurt Granola Fruit	Cheese Egg Wheat Toast Fruit
Snack	Peanut butter Apples Yogurt	Carrots Almonds Cheddar Cheese	Cheese Crackers Fruit	Fruit Almonds Yogurt
Lunch	Chicken Thigh Wheat Toast Salad	Salmon New Potatoes Green Beans	Leftover Soup Salad	Chicken quesadilla Pepperjack Zucchini/Squash
Snack	Crackers Fruit Cheese	Peanut Butter Apples	Fruit Almonds	Carrots Almonds
Dinner	Salmon new potatoes green beans Parmesan Brown Rice	Tomatoes Cream Basil Wheat Bread Cheese	Tortilla Boneless Chicken Thigh PepperJack Cheese Zucchini/Squash Garlic	Leftover Soup Salad

Here's how it plays out. Saturday or Sunday morning, I shop. Sunday is my prep day. On this day I would bake the Salmon, marinate and grill the chicken thighs, roast the new potatoes and green beans, cook the brown rice and prep the tomato soup (but not cook it) and prep the zucchini and squash (but not cook it).

On Monday I would cook both the tomato soup and the soup using any vegetables, grains or beans I need to use up, and that will be on the menu the next two days as Leftover Soup. I make a batch almost every week and it's a great way to rid the fridge of bits and pieces that

don't add up to a full meal: half an onion, one carrot and some kale that has to be cooked or it will be on its way out can all end up in the soup.

Tuesday I'd sautee the zucchini and squash with garlic to go with the leftover chicken in the quesadillas. And on Wednesday I might select a couple more recipes or some tried and true favorites that I want to do over the next few days, since Wednesday is basically a reheat and eat day. I definitely would get more concrete with the next week's plan as the next Sunday approaches though, because that's my major shop/prep day.

If you successfully prepare and eat all the food you planned to eat by Wednesday, then start again for another three or four days. I tend to leave weekends unplanned because we may eat out or get busy with activities and birthday parties. And there are usually leftovers to finish off in an omelet or pasta dish.

My Vegan Plate

If you don't eat dairy, meat or fish there's a MyPlate for you too. Not much changes except you'd eliminate the dairy category and substitute it with a calcium-rich foods category. This would include foods like dark leafy greens, tofu, calcium enriched juices and calcium-fortified soy or almond milk.

Continue eating fruits, vegetables and grains as recommended. Proteins can include the non-meat options discussed above, and there is research that shows combining whole grains like corn with beans and legumes like black beans can provide the necessary amino acids to make complete proteins.

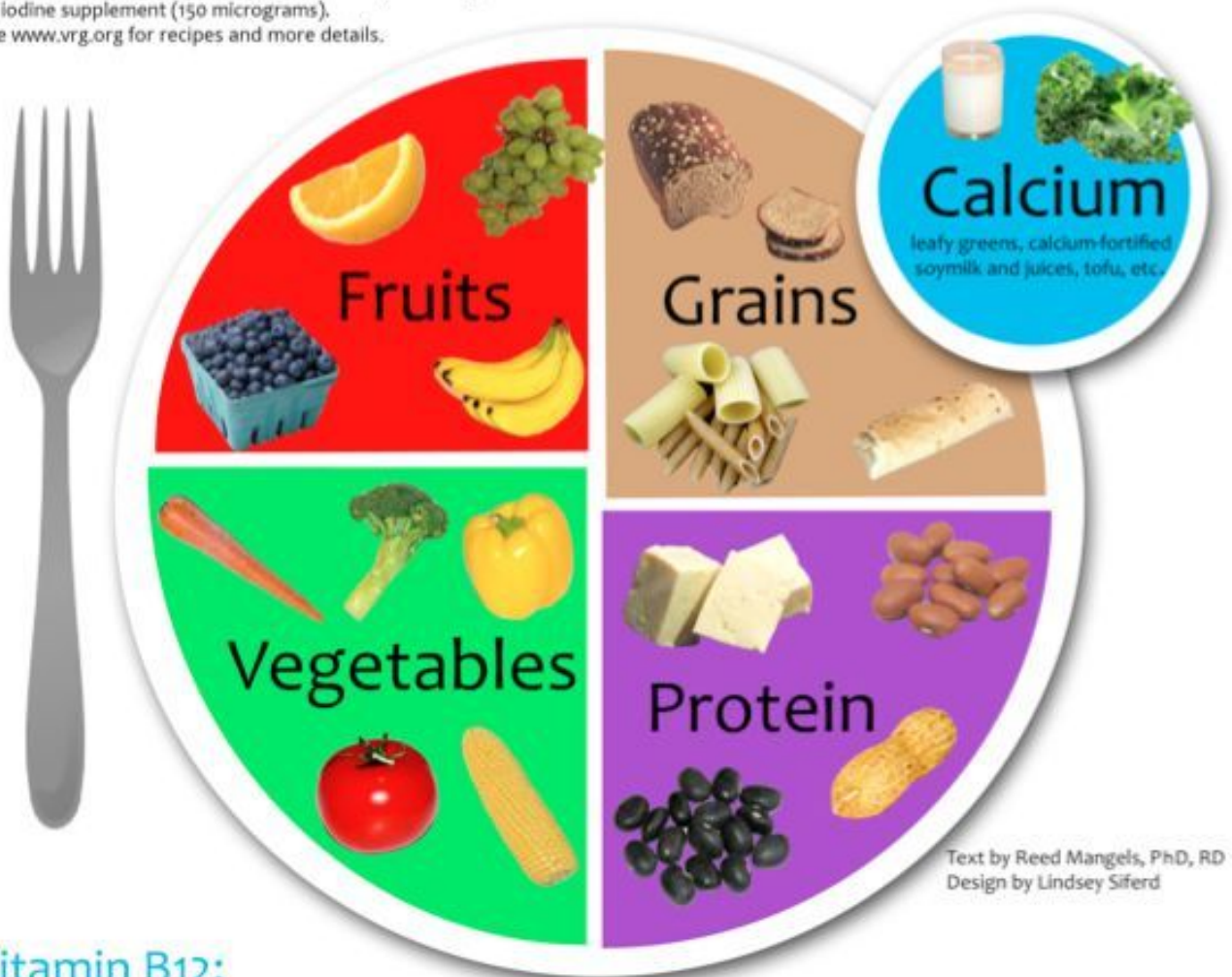
Some vegetarians supplement their diet with seasonings called liquid aminos or coconut aminos. Many vegans benefit from adding nutritional yeast or foods fortified with Vitamin B12 (or a B12 supplement) because that nutrient is found in animal products and can be lacking in a vegan diet. B12 is important for the body's central nervous system and red blood cell development.

If you're feeling a little put out because your little person won't eat meat, read the chapter of "Meat Free Kids" for some insights and solace.

Vegan MY ^ PLATE

Nutrition Tips:

- *Choose mostly whole grains.
- *Eat a variety of foods from each of the food groups.
- *Adults age 70 and younger need 600 IU of vitamin D daily.
Sources include fortified foods (such as some soymilks) or a vitamin D supplement.
- *Sources of iodine include iodized salt (3/8 teaspoon daily) or an iodine supplement (150 micrograms).
- *See www.vrg.org for recipes and more details.



Vitamin B12:

Vegans need a reliable source of vitamin B12. Eat daily a couple of servings of fortified foods such as B12-fortified soymilk, breakfast cereal, meat analog, or Vegetarian Support Formula nutritional yeast. Check the label for fortification. If fortified foods are not eaten daily, you should take a vitamin B12 supplement (25 micrograms daily).

Note:

Like any food plan, this should only serve as a general guide for adults. The plan can be modified according to your own personal needs. This is not personal medical advice. Individuals with special health needs should consult a registered dietitian or a medical doctor knowledgeable about vegan nutrition.



The Vegetarian Resource Group P.O. Box 1463 Baltimore, MD 21203 www.vrg.org (410) 366-8343

Fig 6: Vegan My Plate Diagram

Meat-Free Kids

Joe's dream is to open up a barbecue restaurant just outside of Athens, Ga. On weekends he fires up the smoker and sells his tender, delectable meats at a roadside pop-up market. His is the best in town, many say. Joe is a big, affable guy with a big laugh and big hands wrapped around tongs that spend many hours turning ribs and stuffing saucy shredded pork onto buns. Joe was completely blindsided when his six year old stopped eating a staple in his family's diet.

"She won't eat meat!" he exclaimed, eyes wide with astonishment. "I've tried everything. My meat is good. Tender too. Sauce, no sauce. She won't touch it. Not even chicken nuggets!"

I tried to calm Joe down and promised him his baby girl wasn't going to vanish on a diet of vegetables. He shook his head disbelievingly at first, but as I assured him she was getting plenty of protein from her diet which included nut butters, yogurt, cheese and hummus, he started to settle down. "But *why* won't she eat it? She just says she doesn't like it. But she's *been* eating meat all her life."

Well, Joe, there are a lot of reasons that kids don't eat meat.

Obviously if a child grows up in a vegetarian household, this is just part of this child's lifestyle and is perfectly normal and fine and nothing to see here so let's keep it moving.

Some just never liked it. Won't eat it. End of story. That's probably the easiest for parents to understand because it's a hard and constant NO.

Some children don't like to eat meat simply because it's harder to chew. I see that a lot in the toddler to preschool set. The first year of their lives is spent on a liquid diet. Then a diet of mushy, then soft foods. Chewing was easy. Then you upped ante and threw chicken nuggets or burgers into the mix and things got a little more challenging. That chicken drumstick requires both biting and chewing and holding just so to get to the meaty parts. Then little hands get sticky and greasy and it's just not that much fun for a kid who likes clean hands and doesn't want to work this hard just to get full. Heaven forbid you offer up some stringy pot roast or a tough well done steak. It's just too much! Where's the oatmeal? Where's the peaches? When you read the chapter "Teeth" you'll see how challenging all this biting and chewing really is for these little guys. As they grow bigger mouths, more hand-to-mouth coordination and more teeth, it's likely that kids in this category may join the meateaters club.

If a child was eating meat, and stopped eating meat maybe they've encountered a bad meat-experience: something surprisingly spicy or tangy that was a big turn off. That's a trust issue. The child no longer trusts "The Meat." Can you blame her for not wanting to bite something that bit her back?

Vomiting is a negative experience that will turn a child off of a particular food. If the last thing your daughter ate before a nasty stomach virus set in was a pulled pork sandwich, she may not be able to stomach the taste, smell or sight of pulled pork for a long, long time.

Kids may choose not to eat meat when they discover where it really comes from. Many of our children are so disconnected from their food source that they don't know beef is made from cow flesh, and pork is made from pig flesh. I totally blew a first grader's mind when he discovered chicken is, well, chicken. "You mean the chicken we eat is the same as that bird!" he shouted. "We've been eating *birds*?" I didn't have the heart to tell him about his burger. I have worked with kids as old as fifth grade that honestly didn't know their meat was made from actual four-legged animals. Sometimes when a kid makes the connection they swear off meat. As one little girl told me, "I don't want to eat our animal friends." And as one seventh grader said, "Who are we to keep animals in captivity and murder them just so we can eat them? They're living beings!"

Social consciousness strikes at all ages. After a fifth grade science class watched the documentary *Cowspiracy* many of them swore off beef as an act of environmentalism. After an eleventh grade class watched the documentary *Food Inc.* many of them swore off chicken and increased their consumption of organic produce.

An increased awareness in health, especially amongst teens, can lead to a decrease in meat consumption. Nutritious vegan diets are typically high in fiber, low in saturated fat, full of vitamins and minerals, rich in healthy plant protein, and cholesterol free. Media savvy kids are aware of health news and current data reporting the connections between high meat consumption and lower health outcomes. Statistically, vegetarians have lower rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and obesity than meat-eaters. Studies indicate that the earlier people are started on a healthy diet, the healthier they will be later in life. Other studies support how a plant-based diet can reverse metabolic syndrome and linked diseases. Kids who are health conscious may make the choice to eliminate meat from their diets and opt for a plant-based diet. (Folkvord & de Bruijne, 2020)

Some meat is also harder to digest than other foods. So if you have a child with digestion or elimination issues, they may veer away from meat. Especially if they make a connection between meat consumption and bouts of diarrhea, stomach bloating and indigestion. No two bodies are the same, and some people really do benefit from limiting or eliminating their meat consumption. There are a lot of people who claim they actually feel better after switching to a plant based diet.

Orthodontics and dental work can turn a kid off meat too. Having bits of barbecue ribs stuck in your braces is not a good look. Sore teeth can't chew tough beef.

I suppose there are as many reasons why kids don't eat meat as there are meat free kids. But the takeaway for carnivorous parents is that's not a big deal, really, as long as high-protein foods (eggs, beans and legumes, nuts and nut butters, seeds, whole grains) are always part of the regular rotation. See the chapter "Balanced Nutrition" to see how simple swaps can help you keep your plant-based kids eating a balanced diet.

How Much is Enough?

Feeding Baby

When babies are born, they barely have a stomach, more like a cherry-sized bubble along the digestive tract that can only hold 1-1.5 teaspoon. Food (milk) literally flows right through newborns, which is why they have a food-in-food out kind of thing happening. However this changes rapidly. By day three, baby's stomach is walnut sized and holds up to 1 ounce. By one week, baby's stomach is the size of a small apricot and can hold 1.5-2 ounces. And at two weeks, baby's stomach can hold 2.5 - 5 ounces and is the size of a hen egg. That's rapid growth because babies need their nutrients, but those are still relatively small sizes. Many parents stress over whether or not their infants are getting enough (especially breastfed babies) or too much (especially bottle fed babies). These estimates can be comforting, but more important is learning to read your baby's hunger cues. Babies don't have feeding schedules, just like they don't have growing schedules. They are in a phase of growth and development that is almost unimaginable, and the way they fuel that growth is with food. Even this early, a hungry child eats and eats until they are satisfied. Even if that's every 30 minutes or once every 3 hours.

Baby Feeding Resources:

There are a plethora of books solely dedicated to feeding babies, and organizations such as Le Leche League (<http://www.llli.org/>), your local department of health, your child's pediatrician and experienced lactation consultants (<http://www.ilca.org/home>) who can support you in feeding your baby.

Introducing Solid Foods

One of the biggest and most hotly debated issues facing parents of babies is when to introduce solid foods. The guidelines of when to introduce "complementary foods," which is anything other than breast milk or formula, have been pushed back every few decades after major research reportings. The 1958 guidelines suggested solid foods in the third month, the 1970s brought a delay until after four months, and the 1990s pushed the introduction of solid food out to six months. This has resulted in the all too frequent arguments between new parents and new grandparents about what to feed baby and when. Your mother's "It was good enough for you" advice to add rice cereal to the bottle so that your three month old baby will sleep through the night might be frowned upon by your pediatrician because that is in conflict with the latest research-based recommendations.

A study published 2018 in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* revealed that more than half the parents in the United States start feeding their babies solid foods before they're 6 months old -- the age now recommended by health experts. Introducing solid foods or new drinks too early could deprive them nutritionally and waiting too long can also have negative effects, researchers warned. (Barrera et al., 2018) "Introducing babies to complementary foods too early can cause them to miss out on important nutrients that come from breast milk and infant formula. Conversely, introducing them to complementary foods too late has been associated with micronutrient deficiencies, allergies, and poorer diets later in life," said the study's lead investigator, Chloe Barrera who is with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

So many parents, tired parents, blurry eyed sleep deprived parents lament, "But she's hungry! She's waking up at night. She's always hungry!" And that may be true. But, especially in the case of breast fed babies, the more she eats the more food she helps to create. Increased frequent nursing, sometimes called "cluster feedings" are baby's way of making you (mom) make more milk. You may feel like a human pacifier, but it's a perfect example of supply and demand. Baby's demand increases mom's milk supply.

Also about at 3-4 months babies hit a growth spurt which includes frequent night wakings, extended alertness, fussiness and increased feedings. At this point many parents cave in and offer complementary foods like rice cereals and fruit purees because the baby is fussy, and because the parents are praying this will help her (and them) sleep better. And guess what? Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Which is why you as a parent have to know the latest evidence-based recommendations for feeding babies, *and* you have to learn and know your own child. A lot of parenting is the tightrope walk between what experts say and what your own intuition tells you. Feeding your baby is the first of many ways you will have to come to learn and know your child to be their biggest advocate and support.

So how does your baby tell you when he's ready for solid food?

Babies are amazing in so many ways. Their timing for transitioning to solids is developmentally and physically in sync. Around the time you are convinced a liquid diet is insufficient, your baby should have achieved these milestones:

- Holds her head up consistently higher and for longer periods sets in. Some babies are able to hold their head up from day one, but here we are talking about showing steady, confident neck and head control.
- Babies typically start sitting around 6 months of age, even though they often still require assistance, propping up and supervision. You want to make sure your baby is developed enough to sit up before introducing solid foods.

- Generally speaking, when baby has doubled his birth weight, he is a contender to take on solid foods. The minimum weight is around 13 pounds though, so if your baby was a premie or has developmental delays this may not be the case.
- Baby shows an interest in eating. She's aware of the world around her and has seen what you big people do with food and it looks like a good time. She will reach for your food and will open her mouth in anticipation as food is presented to her. Keep in mind 4-6 month babies reach for everything and put almost everything in their mouths, so this sign can be a little misleading.
- Baby can safely move solid foods around in his mouth with less risk of choking when the tongue-thrust reflex fades away. The tongue-thrust reflex protects infants from choking when an unusual object is placed on the tongue by automatically protruding outward rather than back. This reflex gradually diminishes between four and six months of age, and prior to this most little tastes will automatically be spit out.
- Baby can tell you he is full by turning away from the bottle or breast. This self-regulation will ensure baby isn't overeating.

Keep in mind all babies are different. Remember that breast milk/formula IS real food. Introducing solid food doesn't guarantee baby will sleep longer or "better." If your baby's digestive system isn't ready for complementary foods, you could be setting her up for stomach aches, gas, constipation and other issues. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests waiting until 6 months to introduce solids, so don't be pressured by well-meaning in-laws if you don't feel your baby is ready.

For the first full year, breast milk/formula is *still* baby's number one source for nutrition. When starting, solid foods should be offered after a regular feeding to ensure your baby's nutritional requirements are being met.

Solid foods in the beginning are more like a "food activity" and "practice eating" until solid foods gradually become the center point after one year. Expect this to be a messy endeavor and as your baby's motor control improves, he may prefer finger foods over being fed. Start with a tiny amount - a quarter of a teaspoon - and gradually increase the amount and frequency of feedings based on your baby's interests. Never give baby hard foods like popcorn or uncut circular foods that could get lodged in her throat. Round foods like grapes should always be cut and seeds removed. Wait a week between introducing new foods to minimize potential digestive upset and so that you can identify exactly what baby is reacting to if a reaction occurs.

To minimize the risk of allergies, it's a good idea to wait until your baby is at least a year old before introducing citrus fruits (including oranges, lemons, and grapefruit) kiwi, strawberries, peanuts and peanut butter, eggs, soy products (including soy milk and tofu), and cow's milk (including cheeses, yogurt, and ice cream). If there is a family history of food allergy, consult your doctor or allergist for advice on when to start your baby on these more-allergenic foods; it may differ from recommendations for babies without allergic history.

Babies under a year should not be given honey or corn syrup as they carry the risk of botulism.

First Foods

Babies are exposed to their mother's diet through the amniotic fluid. This is thought to be a safety precaution that could ensure that the soon-to-emerge human is acclimated to their environment with a preference for commonly consumed foods. Mother's diet is also reflected in the quality and taste of breast milk. So when offering first foods to baby, consider some of the flavors and aromas your baby may already be familiar with. People big and small enjoy flavor, and babies are no different. In fact breast milk is quite sweet, and some formulas have flavor enhancers to entice babies to drink more. So flavor, even in the littlest of mouths, matters.

Baby's first food should be a single ingredient like sweet potatoes or bananas. Foods that are nutritious and tasty and easy to digest like avocados or pureed peas are also good choices. Parents can save a lot of money by making their baby's food instead of purchasing pre-made foods. However prepackaged foods are very convenient for times when you and baby are on the go.

There has been a trend in America to start babies on rice cereal, but there's no reason why rice cereal has to be your baby's first food. In fact, as it is iron fortified, it can cause constipation in babies that have been exclusively breastfed (most formula is iron fortified so babies who drink formula are accustomed to it).

Here is a list of first food recommendations from the Le Leche League:
(<http://www.llli.org/faq/firstfoods.html>).

Fruits

Most babies love fruits. Make sure they are ripe, and wash well before peeling. Here are some favorites:

- Bananas cut into slices which have then been halved or quartered
- Unsweetened applesauce, or tiny apple chunks that have been softened by cooking in the microwave
- Plums, peaches, pears, and apricots, gently cooked if necessary
- Avocado diced into small, bite size pieces

Vegetables

Fresh vegetables should be washed, peeled and cooked until tender. Frozen veggies are convenient to have on hand. Avoid the canned varieties to which salt has been added. Your baby may enjoy:

- Baked or boiled sweet potatoes, in tiny chunks

- Mashed white potatoes
- Baby carrots, green beans, peas and squash

Meat and fish

Babies often prefer well-cooked chicken, which is soft and easy to eat when shredded. Be careful to remove even the tiny bones when serving fish.

Beans and legumes

Remove the skins from beans as they tend to be harder to digest. If you use canned beans for convenience, make sure they are unseasoned.

Grains and cereals

Commercial, iron-fortified cereals are often the first foods served to babies who are not breastfeeding because they need the extra iron, but breastfed babies are rarely anemic as the iron in human milk is well-utilized. If there is concern about the baby's iron levels, a simple test can be done in the doctor's office.

Whole grain cereals, breads and crackers are the most nutritious. Wait until later in the year before offering wheat products. If you use cereals, make sure that they only have one ingredient and use either water or your own milk for mixing. Many mothers prefer to let their older babies chew on a hard bagel or an end of bread instead of sugary teething biscuits.

Toddlers

After the first year, it's normal for your child's appetite to fall off. The first year of growth for humans is absolutely mind boggling, and for now the physical developments will taper off a bit while your Little Einstein picks up a ton of new skills including crawling, walking, running, talking (a truly amazing feat) and learning all the social stuff that structures the lives of humans in our little family-tribes and communities. It's complicated. And they take it in like sponges. With all the excitement going on between The Letter of the Day, If You're Happy and You Know it Clap Your Hands, and Goodnight Moon, toddlers face a full day full of distractions, and way more fun things to do than sit down and eat.

Let's get some perspective on how much is enough by looking at the physical size of the stomach. In an adult the stomach is about the size of your fist. It can stretch up to 40 times that size to accommodate food and liquid, but that's not our goal. Overeating isn't what we are trying to achieve. Saity is. You want to fill that fist sized pouch with as much diverse, nutrient dense food as possible, without stuffing it. Now, compare your fist to the size of the standard American 12 inch dinner plate and you see instantly how portion distortion comes into play.

Have your child make a fist. That's pretty small isn't it? Even if you put two of his fists together you're looking at a small portion of food. Now, take that two fist portion and compare that to your 12 inch dinner plate. You can see now how the expectation of how much he is comfortably eating in one setting is easily distorted. Most healthy children have a mechanism to stop eating when they are no longer hungry, and they *learn* to overeat as we pressure them to finish everything on their plates. Consider that he probably had a snack of some sort within the last two hours, and you can start to see how this not-all-that-hungry kid with a smaller-than-you-think stomach is going to give you push back when it comes to eating what you overestimated is "enough." A hungry kid will eat, and he will eat until his hunger is satisfied.

Finally, consider that two-fisted portion of food that is about twice the size of your kid's stomach. That entire portion is supposed to encompass the five food groups of the MyPlate Diagram: fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins and dairy. Let's set the dairy aside for a moment because many of the nutrients found in dairy (calcium, Vitamin D, protein, fat) can be supported by the other food groups, and because so much of the population is lactose intolerant. And let's face it, foods in the dairy category, for those who can eat it, are pretty easy sells to kids: yogurt, cheese, milk, ice cream are pretty easy to get kids to eat. But back to the two fist portion: divide that into quarters, each representing the remaining food groups. There is your balanced meal! And you may be thinking, "But that's just a couple of spoonfuls of this and a couple of bites of that!" Exactly. And if repeated for each meal of the day, you can be fairly confident that not only is your kid getting enough to eat, but she is also getting enough of everything she needs for a balanced diet. (You can add a sprinkle of cheese or serve it with a glass of milk and now you have all five of your food groups back in play.)

Daily portions for a two year old could look like 1 cup of fruit, 1 cup of vegetables, 3 ounces of grains, 2 ounces of protein and 2 cups of dairy. For a three to five year old it could look like 1 ½ cups of fruit, 1 ½ - 2 cups of vegetables, 4-5 ounces of grains, 3-5 ounces of protein, and 2-2 ½ cups of dairy.

Grazers vs. Anti-Grazers

One of the first things to know about toddlers is that they are grazers. Like herds of gazelle on the Serengeti. It's an all day thing. Their goal is to get in the maximum calories between episodes of sleep as possible, but without stopping what amazing fun thing they may be doing - like pulling up grass or chasing the cat or flapping their arms to their favorite song. We try to structure their incessant grazing into three meals and two snacks, but more realistically we're looking at six snacks, plus more snacks. In America, our habit is to reward behaviors with snacks (potty training), to distract with snacks (while grocery shopping or needing to talk on the phone), and to placate with snacks (Is little Kareem crying? Give him a snack). The over-snacking of American kids continues all through their school years, and recently experts have taken on Soccer Moms in an effort to restructure what snacking looks like (Donuts after soccer practice? No bueno.).

You have probably heard that it is recommended that adults eat five to six small meals throughout the day. This is to help regulate blood sugar levels and provide a general sense of fullness that curbs overeating. Many adults find eating small frequent meals difficult mainly because it doesn't fit in the scope of the work day. Eating that often means we have to stop our workflow to provide self care. It feels self indulgent and flies in the face of the image of the stoic, automaton worker bee that we have been initiated to believe represents a good worker and serves the greater good. But judging by the unmanaged stressed and soaring metabolic issues of the lay person, skimping on self care isn't doing us a whole lot of good.

Children naturally eat this way. They are grazers. Sometimes to the chagrin of parents who just want them to "Sit down and eat so you can get full!" Sometimes that also sounds like, "If you ate all of your dinner you wouldn't be hungry now." It also sounds like, "How can you be hungry? We just ate!"

Often what it looks like is a kid that is constantly snacking but just picking over "real" meals with lukewarm interest. This also sets the stage for pickiness, because if a child isn't genuinely hungry it is a lot easier for her to sit at the table and play food critic. Hungry kids eat, and they eat until they are satisfied.

All day snacking has its pros and cons. Let's look at how some experts believe small frequent meals benefit young children. And let's hear how other experts think grazing is setting our kids up for obesity.

Support your grazer by setting the stage for your all-day snacker with a smorgasbord of healthy choices with this tip from "Ask Dr. Sears."

Here's a trick from the Sears' family kitchen for the preschool child. Prepare a nibble tray. Use an ice cube tray, a muffin tin, or a compartmentalized plastic dish and fill each section with bite-size portions of colorful and nutritious foods. Give the foods fun names, such as avocado boats (a quarter of a California avocado sectioned lengthwise), banana or cooked carrot wheels, broccoli trees, cheese blocks, little O's (O-shaped cereal), canoe eggs (hard-boiled eggs cut lengthwise in wedges), moons (peeled apple slices, thinly spread with peanut butter), or shells and worms (different shapes of pasta).

Don't forget that children love to dip. Reserve one or two compartments in the tray for your child's favorite dips, such as yogurt or guacamole (without the spices). Encourage the child to sit and nibble from the tray frequently throughout the day, especially late in the morning and in the mid-to-late afternoon, when the fuel from the previous meal begins to wear off. Shorten the spacing between feedings and you are less likely to have spacey children.

<https://www.askdrsears.com/topics/feeding-eating/feeding-infants-toddlers/grazing>
(Sears, 2020)

Anti-grazers believe all this snacking is adding empty calories to our kids' diets and ruining their appetites for "real" meals. In an article for Parents Magazine, pediatric dietician Natalia Stasenکو MS, RD (<https://feedingbytes.com/meet-natalia/>) points to snacking as the number one feeding mistake that parents make. She writes, "Toddlers are capable of waiting 2-3 hours between meals and snacks and preschoolers and school age kids can go 3-4 hours without eating." Stasenکو posted a typical two year old "healthy grazer" eating schedule:

- **6:30am:** 8 oz whole milk - 160 calories
- **8:30am:** 1/2 cup strawberries and 1/2 croissant - 140 calories
- **10am:** 1/2 cup applesauce in a pouch on a way to swimming class - 50 calories
- **11:30am:** 1 oz small pack of fruit snacks at the grocery store to distract child while mom is shopping - 105 calories
- **12:30pm:** Not interested in lunch
- **12:45pm:** A fruit and vegetable pouch (since lunch left untouched) - 80 calories
- **1pm:** 8 oz of milk before nap - 160 calories
- **3pm:** 1 oz of cheerios and 1/3 apple for snack at a playdate- 140 calories
- **5pm:** Starving on the way home from the playdate, mom gives another apple sauce pouch - 50 calories
- **6pm:** Not interested in dinner
- **7pm:** 8oz bottle of whole milk before bed - 160 calories
- **Total calories:** 1045

And she concludes:

As you can see, the child who does not "seem" to eat anything, in fact eats enough to meet his calorie needs. Pressuring him to eat at mealtimes will likely lead to stressful meals and even less interest in eating the meals parents prepare. And although he is getting the calories for proper growth, he is missing out on quality family time at mealtimes and exposure to the "grown-up" foods he is expected to learn to eat. Besides, his parents may be worried by his constant begging for packaged snacks and lack of interest in more nutritious chicken and broccoli they serve for dinner.

So the middle-ground to not have cranky nutrient deprived children, or kids who are missing out on meal times seems to be to 1) have scheduled snack times so that snacks aren't just popping up all willy nilly throughout the day; 2) compose snacks from two or three food groups so that they are more like balanced mini-meals loaded with nutrition; 3) watch the beverages like juice and milk which contain filling calories and keep those drinks paired with actual meals with water in between meals; and 4) don't use food as a distraction, or for entertainment, or to soothe hurt feelings or as a reward.

That's an ongoing uphill battle, but the more parents know about the nutritional needs of their kids, the more likely they are to choose healthier snack options and push back against peer pressure from cupcake loving parents who ask "What's the big deal?" The big deal being if

teachers are rewarding kids with sugary snacks, and every celebration features sugary snacks, and all manner of life events from vaccinations to birthday parties to Saturday morning pancakes are all punctuated with sugary snacks, you can see pretty easily that we're looking at a major sugar dilemma. One that is tied to an exponential surge in metabolic syndrome and the 86 million pre-diabetics that are on the precipice of a massive national health crisis. But let's get back to these toddlers.

Toddlers are in a hurry to get back to business, whatever that means, so they have a tendency to cram food into their mouths so they can continue about their day. For that reason, choking hazards are very real. Here is a list of foods to either avoid, or cut into small pieces to avoid choking.

Unsafe Foods for Toddlers

Avoid the following foods, which could be swallowed whole and block the windpipe:
Hot dogs (unless cut in quarters lengthwise before being sliced)
Chunks of peanut butter (Peanut butter may be spread thinly on bread or a cracker, but never give chunks of peanut butter to a toddler.)
Nuts—especially peanuts
Raw cherries with pits
Round, hard candies—including jelly beans
Gum
Whole grapes
Marshmallows
Raw carrots, celery, green beans
Popcorn
Seeds—such as processed pumpkin or sunflower seeds
Whole grapes, cherry tomatoes (cut them in quarters)
Large chunks of any food such as meat, potatoes, or raw vegetables and fruits

Toddlers <https://www.todayparent.com/family/feed-toddler-during-growth-spurts/> (Pinarski, 2014)

Another quirk of toddlers is how a balanced diet is perceived. Instead of looking at every meal as an opportunity for five food groups, keep a log, and see if your child is eating a balanced diet according to their WEEKLY intake. Parents will often freak out because their child is on a food jag, and only eating blueberries. That may last for three days, but if you are keeping a log, you will see where bits of cheese and bread and peanut butter were involved during that blueberry binge, and when looking at the last seven days, vegetables, healthy fats, proteins and whole grains also balanced things out. In fact many pediatricians suggest looking at your young child's

food intake over a week instead of over a day to see if he is indeed getting balanced nutrition. It takes the pressure off of you, the parent, on the day-to-day level too.

By the age of two your toddler should be able to handle a spoon, feed herself all manner of bite sized finger foods (Her version of “bite sized,” not your version of “bite sized”), and hold a cup. She is also still likely to make a mess, have huge spills, and get food into every orifice. Encouraging the use of utensils is great, but realize your child will probably eat more with her hands at this point because it is efficient. While the budding independence of your toddler is adorable, it is also messy. Anticipate that, and maybe during family meals provide meatballs without gravy, pasta without sauce, or other foods that are the same as what the family is eating, but without the added mess. For now. Or consider the stage -- the Dipping Stage -- which lasts all through preschool, and let's face it, some of us have never outgrown it and still love our dips.

Preschoolers

Three to five year olds are mastering their fine motor skills and are excellent dunkers and dippers. So now you can provide SOS (sauce on the side) for the dipping pleasure of your child, and most of it will not end up on the floor, in hair, or on clothes like it did when your child was a toddler. Dipping is a way to encourage eating fruits and vegetables too. For my PreK tribe, I've prepared steamed broccoli served with a honey-mustard dip that we prepared together and 99.99% of the time all of those four year olds devour all of the broccoli and the dip. For this reason it is a good idea to make sure your dips (and all of your food, really) are made from real, whole-food ingredients. Salad dressings, dips and spreads are all super quick and easy to make. I promise you, they are! Just check some of the recipes at the back of the book.

Around three or so your preschooler will hit a growth spurt. If you find her incessantly snacky you may want to increase her portion size of vegetables by a tablespoon, and increase her whole grains and protein servings by an ounce. Vegetables and whole grains have lots of fiber, and fiber and protein can help keep her feeling fuller longer.

Balance for Big Kids

Several pediatricians have suggested that you look at what your child eats from a weekly perspective instead of a daily one to get a bigger picture of how balanced their eating habits are. I find this particularly useful for those busy tweens and teens because they are away from our gaze much of the time. Have your kid keep a food and beverage log for a week. It can be a very eye-opening experience, and one that you may want to repeat from time to time just to check his diet. Discuss any problem areas, and let him brainstorm on how he can make improvements. Busy kids tend to eat a lot more junk food and fast food and snacks. This may be improved by more meal planning and intentional grocery shopping so that he is armed with healthy snacks and on-the-go meals, and homemade meals can be assembled more quickly.

Appetites and portion sizes increase as your little one stretches out. But remembering to balance meals and to make snacks like mini-meals can keep your active young person on track.

A lot of kids love their snacks and the trick is making those snacks more well rounded and nutritious. A serving size of potato chips is one ounce (about 15 chips and 150 calories), but if you give a 10 ½ ounce bag of potato chips to most 15 year olds, they'll eat the whole bag in short order, which is about 14 servings or 2100 calories. That's about how many calories that same teen needs in a *day* without the necessary nutrients. But that teen isn't keen on giving up the chips, so what to do? Understand what a portion is, and pair that portion with choices from different food groups. Have an ounce of potato chips with a mandarin orange and a granola bar. Or pair it with an apple and some peanut butter. Or have chips with a handful of almonds and some grapes. All of those are an improvement over a bag full of chips.

Sugar sweetened beverages are really the domain of tweens and teens. Some can consume 1,000 calories a day just from their drinks! And these are empty calories, devoid of nutrients, so it is important to emphasize water as the best choice, even after a good workout. For more information on sugar sweetened beverages, check out the chapter Treats, Sweets and Drinks. And for tips on how to hydrate your young athlete, see the chapter How to Feed an Athlete.

If you feel like a broken record saying “balance, balance, balance,” you're doing a good job. It falls under all of the other things good parents repeat over and over again like “Did you finish your homework?” “Brush your teeth.” “Call your grandparents.” “Don't hit your brother.” Since all of your teen's functioning is dependent on their diet, - glowing skin, good sleep, test scores, less attitude (we can hope) - then keeping their balanced diet a priority is going to be a parental imperative until they leave the nest. Hopefully, by then, the lessons will be so deeply ingrained that they'll be able to feed themselves with confidence.

Despite their proclivity for taking risks, all teens aren't necessarily adventurous eaters. So if you thought your teen would be a gourmand by now, that may not be the case. Some are hesitant still, to step into culinary adventure. However with the booming global food culture, more and more young people take an interest in food at younger and younger ages. Some kids are so passionate about food that they grow, shop and cook food from an early age. Kids who love to bake may have a lot of sweet, tempting goodies on hand, but lack the discipline to resist those cupcakes and cookies. Make sure your little pastry chef has a game plan that involves balancing out those tasty treats, or giving them away to friends and family. Cooking is a life skill that all kids should learn, because when you are confident in the kitchen it is easy to whip up food that is delicious and healthy.

For a lot of families the years six to ten are a sweet spot when feeding their kids. If you haven't fallen for the “picky eater” games, and the children have been exposed to healthy eating patterns and have developed a decent repertoire of what they WILL eat, then the dinner battles are mostly behind you. Check out the chapter “Exploring Picky Eaters” if your school aged kid is still holding out on you. Also learn to diffuse the bomb in the “Solving the Dinner Dilemma” chapter.

One of the big issues that does crop up with this age group is that they lose a lot of teeth. All of their teeth in fact, and some point before the age of 12. This is a legitimate cause for some dinner dilemmas, so much so, that I've given an entire chapter to teeth, how they grow, and how they impact the ways kids eat (or don't eat). I recommend you give that chapter a read. The second issue that plagues this age group is also related to teeth and that's orthodontics, which is also addressed in the teeth chapter.

The third thing, which can be a pro depending on how you wield this one, is peer pressure. This can work for or against you. If suddenly eating salads is "unmanly" then you may be faced with a sulky nine year old who used to love kale salad but is suddenly refusing to eat it. However peer pressure can work in your favor as well. When they are in large groups (or herds) elementary aged kids will eat whatever everyone else is eating. That means at the class party, there can be platters of fruit salad and turkey sandwiches instead (or along with, who are we kidding?) cupcakes, and it will be eaten without pause. If one kid eats a grape, they're all going in. While having lunch with third graders I was surprised to see how many had grocery store sushi packed because it was the popular thing in that class. One year I was surprised by the number of first graders who loved dried seaweed because it was a popular snack. I've introduced store-bought vegetable chips as a class snack for a kindergarten and they were so popular the teachers added them to the regular snack rotation. There was a year when roasted broccoli was all the rage and 5th graders were requesting it as a snack. Like popcorn. Read that again. Fifth graders were eating broccoli like popcorn. So all that goes to show you that, just like gummy worms and Oreos gain popularity with this age group as they get exposed to more and more of what their friends eat, the food popularity and peer pressure game can swing the other way towards healthier choices as well.

If anything, the big hurdle to clear here isn't so much what to eat as WHEN to eat because this is when our kids find themselves with tight schedules. Between homework, extracurricular activities, birthday parties, family time and, well, just being a kid, it can be tough to get those family dinners in. And the more time your child spends carpooling and jet setting around to activities and rehearsals, the more likely they are to eat fast food (in the car no less), snacks and other grab and go food-like substances that just don't make for great nutrition. So what do you do?

Well, you have to be the grown up and make family meals a priority. Does that mean every dinner every day? Only if that works for you. Does that mean hot breakfast every morning? If you can manage it. It really means taking a look at what's important and shifting priorities. It means looking for opportunities when you *can* eat together, and it means encouraging healthy choices when you *can't* eat together.

Elementary aged children are able to make good, healthy choices about food. And they are rather good at executing on behalf of their own health. If nutritious food has been part of their "norm" and making healthy choices a part of their growing autonomy, then at least some of the time, they will do the "right" thing even when you're not looking. I know, because I'm looking and

listening when you're not there. First graders will remind each other to eat all of their vegetables. Fifth graders will insist on water instead of soda. Third graders talk about how too much salt can cause a heart attack. Now they may not always be accurate in the details of their conversations, but the point is they are *thinking* about healthy choices and they are *aware* of the consequences of unhealthy choices. Our job is to feed them information so they can arm themselves to do battle in the cafeteria, fast food drive through or at the vending machine. Will your kid choose kale chips over Doritos every time? Probably not. But some of the time, she might.

The way you can tilt the healthy decision scale in your favor is by making this a practice. The more often your kid can choose healthy options, the more often she will make healthy choices when she's out in the world and out of your line of sight. This means healthy options are available at home all the time. In fact you are under no obligation as a parent to buy unhealthy options at any time unless you want to. There is no arguing about eating too many cookies if the cookies aren't there. Little Naomi can't ruin her appetite on Lucky Charms if there aren't any Lucky Charms to be had. And honestly if Joseph fills up on fresh fruit and yogurt and doesn't have room for dinner, can you really be mad? He's eating healthy food. So his timing could be better. Parents, you gotta pick your battles.

The healthy choices thing really works best with you on board because they do as we do, regardless of what we say. If you become a mouthpiece for the USDA screaming about healthy choices from sunup to sundown, your kids won't be convinced. However if you model healthy behaviors they will be far more likely to do as you do and eat the vegetables, choose the healthier snack, or drink the water.

I was once approached by a father whose nine year old daughter was diagnosed with diabetes. He said, "I keep telling her she has to watch what she eats. I keep telling her to avoid those sweet snacks. I keep telling her..."

So I listened for a while and then I said, "Sir, are you doing those things?"

He just looked at me for a minute, and I could tell he was rethinking what he'd said.

"Remember the old saying, 'Do as I say, not as I do?'" I asked. He nodded. "Did it work back when you were a kid?"

He laughed and shook his head. "No. It never worked," he said. "I have to show her by doing it myself."

"You have to model the desired outcome. You will be healthier, she will be healthier. It's a win-win," I said. He thanked me profusely. It was a simple solution, but usually it is, isn't it?

Tweens

One day you'll realize not only are you not getting pushback about what's for dinner, you're also not having to fuss about your kids not finishing their meal. In fact, everything gets eaten all the time. When this happens, brace yourself. You're about to witness THE GROWTH SPURT.

During these "tween years" from 10-12 years old, your kid might do outrageous things like outgrow all of their school clothes... overnight. Skip a shoe size or two. Sleep for 18 hours and

wake up 3 inches taller. It's flat out freaky to watch and the pre-teen growth spurt, which often coincides with the onset of puberty, is fueled by food. *Lots* of food. Long-time picky eaters are suddenly less picky because they are simply hungry. There is also increased (although sporadic) maturity too, and the experience of having lived a decade or so on the planet which tends to inform certain *expectations* like: it's Taco Tuesday again, so act accordingly. In some ways they are more compliant in family meal expectations (and defiant in just about everything else).

Now, as always, with this emerging eater and increased appetite it is really important to emphasize and encourage and provide good nutrition. But as he starts Hoovering away all of the groceries you may start to wonder how long you can afford to feed this person. He's not even a full fledged teenager yet, and already the grocery bill is rising. Blogger mom Tracy Lopez noticed her boys were eating more as they were growing, but she also noticed her food budget hadn't grown at the pace her kids were growing. She listed some good tips to help you afford to feed your big kid (especially if you have more than one) in the article "9 Foods to Stock Up On During a Growth Spurt." <https://mom.me/lifestyle/18480-growth-spurt-9-foods-stock/> (Lopez, 2015) Nutrient dense, filling and inexpensive foods like eggs, tuna, fresh fruits and vegetables, peanut butter and oatmeal make her list. I'd like to add beans, soup and sandwiches/wraps to it as well. All of these are foods that tweens can prepare themselves, will fill them up with protein, good fats and fiber, and will give them more nutrients than common snack foods.

Teens

From now and through the teen years there will be a lot of consideration by your kid about his or her appearance. Whether they talk about it or not, they are observing, judging and being judged by their peers. It's a totally natural part of growing up, and it can tie into issues about body image which can tie into diet. Again, reiterate the importance of balance. Emphasize science-based information about nutrition as opposed to fads and diets. Explore the dangers of artificial substances, not just in food, but in the environment, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, illegal substances, steroids. Remember you are what you eat, literally! Make a science project out of it. Teenagers can think critically through challenges, use media for research and investigation, analyze data and draw conclusions. They don't always need to be spoon fed information to come to the best decision. Our job is making sure they are informed with good intel.

Teenagers are a mixed bag of amazing independence and autonomy tossed together with a ton of insecurity and lots of unanswered questions. With all their free time and pocket change they tend to eat like a dumpster, any and everything that requires the least amount of effort. Unfortunately a lot of teenagers lack basic cooking and shopping skills, and rely on instant snacks and fast food as their primary source of "food." As parents, we can be enablers by *not* encouraging them to cook and clean, or by *not* giving them say into our weekly shopping lists and menus. We can't treat them like helpless children and expect them to make adult decisions.

Hanging out in high school cafeterias has shown me what tweens and teens really eat when bringing lunch from home, and it is overwhelmingly instant noodles and pizza. A stunning

amount. You wouldn't believe it if I told you. So either these kids haven't been taught how to build a healthy lunch, or their parents aren't emphasizing the importance of doing so. With all the food options supposedly available at home, instant noodles is what your kids are bringing to school. No fruit. No sandwiches. The "seasoning packet" alone in those cup-o-soup things will drop a horse. Where are the vegetables? Where is the protein? How can you expect your student to thrive when they are nutritionally deprived? The school bought lunches offer a little more variety, but they are still overwhelmingly beige/brown and carbohydrate heavy. Some schools and smaller school systems seem to be more successful and revitalizing the school cafeteria food, but I'd say the majority of school kids would loudly denigrate their cafeterias' cuisine. There was traction since the Obama administration of farm-to-school programs and many grants that support overhauling cafeteria menus to better reflect nutritious *and* delicious meals that are appealing. But it goes deeper than just tweaking a few recipes. Visit your kids' school cafeteria. Is it a place *you* would want to eat? Does the food smell, look and taste appealing to *you*?

Feeding them is still as important as it was when they encountered that first adolescence of Terrible Twos and Threenagers. Jill Castle, a registered dietitian, childhood nutritionist, and mom wrote "7 Ways to Support Teen Growth Spurt."

<https://jillcastle.com/teenager-nutrition/7-ways-support-teen-growth-spurt/> (Castile, 2019) In the article she explains some of the *whys* behind teen eating (their cravings can be hormonally triggered or fueling cognitive and physical developments, among other things). She stresses the importance of good nutrition and a balanced diet (protein, but not too much), but she also emphasizes that teens need to get enough sleep (8 ½ to 9 hours a night). Castle also recommends focusing on building strong bones during growth spurts with foods high in calcium and vitamin D. Parents should support regular feeding schedules and reign in snacking. Parents can simplify the *what* teens eat by sticking to a 90:10 rule where 90% of the teens diet is dedicated to nutritious growth-promoting foods, and 10% less healthy choices. Her last tip is to encourage physical activity. Statistically girls in middle school start to opt out of physical activity and this has been linked to increased obesity rates in middle and high school girls in America. Staying active can include sport, but it can also include leisurely activities like skating, swimming, hiking and dancing. Walking the dog, riding a bike or taking yoga classes are other options for physical activity in kids who aren't inclined to take up traditional high school sports like track, basketball and tennis.

According to the experts at AskDrSears, teens are notoriously overfed and undernourished. In addition to a nutritious diet, they recommend you use "Teen Think" to make balanced nutrition relevant to your teen so they're more inclined to take ownership of their diet.

Use teen thinking to your advantage. Teens want to grow, so you talk about foods that help them grow and foods that don't. For example, many teens see some of their peers growing at a faster rate (which is genetic and not nutritional), so take this opportunity to talk with them about calcium-rich foods and how soft drinks contain phosphoric acid, which can rob them of calcium and interfere with bone growth. Besides growth,

adolescents are appearance conscious. Talk to them about the correlation between nutritious food and healthy-looking skin. Athletic teens are concerned about their sports performance. Teach them the connection between nutritious eating and optimal exercise performance.

This form of teaching uses the principle of relevance. In order for a message to sink in, teens must believe the nutritional message has specific reference to them. Be specific. Tell them how it is going to affect their growth, their looks, their emotional feelings, their sport's performance, or whatever seems to be the most important to the teen during that particular week.

<http://www.askdrsears.com/topics/feeding-eating/family-nutrition/teen-nutrition>. (Sears, 2020)

Make sure you are empowering your young person to make good choices, to be self-sufficient, and to advocate on their behalf so that they have what they need to succeed getting balanced nutrition. Remember the end-game for us parents is to raise *adults*, not kids, who are capable of feeding themselves.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/nutrition/Pages/A-Teenagers-Nutritional-Needs.aspx> (HealthyChildren, 2016)

Healthy Eating on a Budget

This chapter is about planning, shopping and preparing healthy meals for your family. As I travel about doing presentations on this topic I often hear the hurdles people are having trouble clearing when it comes to making healthy meals. These are stumbling blocks that seem to often impeding the path to a health diet:

- Lack of **time** for shopping and cooking
- Healthy food is **expensive**
- Lack of **knowledge**
- Healthy food doesn't **taste** good

These are myths. None of this is true. You've been duped into believing you can't feed yourself and your family so that other people can make money off of you. You may need to re-prioritize and re-organize but you CAN feed yourself and your family without breaking the bank, sucking up all your freetime, or eating food that tastes like cardboard. Let's dispel these myths once and for all so that you can eat healthfully within your food budget.

Time

I have five tips to save you time when it comes to shopping and cooking meals.

1. Meal Planning
2. Smart Shopping
3. Leftover makeovers/Batch cooking
4. Appropriate cooking methods

Meal Planning

Meal Planning has a bad reputation. Probably because every meal plan you find online or in a diet is overblown. Most of us don't live lives so predictably that we can eat three meals and two snacks seven days a week. For many of us, just buying that much food would be wasteful because we couldn't eat it all. For others there is just too much variability in day to day living to plan meals to such detail.

If you were to take a road trip, you would make sure you had enough fuel in your tank to get to your destination. For some reason we don't apply that same assurance to our own fuel - our food. Then we act surprised and bothered when it's time to eat. If you want to eat healthfully you have to plan accordingly, because it's very difficult to eat a balanced meal when you're making

a split-second decision giant while french fries and huge cheesy burgers are staring you down from the fast food drive through menu.

Look, you have to eat. So you might as well plan to eat so that you eat well. What's that saying? When you fail to plan, you plan to fail. Meal planning doesn't have to be too complicated. You don't even have to have the recipes completely figured out. If you use this process, you will have healthy, inexpensive, recognizable ingredients on hand that you can throw together to create nutritious meals.

Meal Planning for One Week

3 lean proteins
2 green vegetables
2 red, yellow or orange vegetables
2 fruits
2 complex carbohydrates

Start by taking stock of what you have on hand. Using what you have keeps money in your wallet. Think about ingredients you can use multiple times like rice, pasta, beans. Consider large cuts of meat that you can cook once and use, and reuse again like a whole hen or a roast. Consider how you're going to use up your leftovers so that you can add those meals into your meal plan. Remember that recipes like casseroles, stews, stir fries and skillet sautes really don't require more than chopped vegetables, a little meat or beans, and something juicy like broth, tomatoes or sauce.

Shopping

Save time by shopping at the same stores. That way you know the layout and you don't waste time wandering the aisles. And always take a shopping list. This is your map, your guide to healthy, pre-thought out choices, and will steer you away from making impromptu purchases that don't support your health goals. Use the list. Love the list. Don't forget the shopping list!

To create a shopping list, use the sales flyers from your grocery store to make the most affordable purchases. Most store sales flyers are available online, and many stores even have shopping apps that will compile your list for you. This is a short process that you can do at a glance. As an example, if salmon was on sale this week I might select it as one of the lean proteins this week. If blueberries are in season, I may use them as a fruit for this week. This is what your basic meal plan/shopping list could look like based on what's on sale:

Meal Planning for One Week

3 lean proteins

- Eggs
- Chicken Wings
- Ground turkey

2 green vegetables

- Green Beans
- Kale

2 red, yellow or orange vegetables

- Yellow squash
- Sweet potatoes

2 fruits

- Blueberries
- Mandarin Oranges

2 complex carbohydrates

- Oatmeal
- Brown Rice

Now add some toilet paper and kitty litter and you have your shopping list! With this basic meal plan, and some staples that you keep on hand like herbs and spices, onions and peppers, and condiments, you have options to create quick and easy meals. Aim for balance in the meals by pulling from the five food groups on the MyPlate diagram: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy.

Breakfast could be oatmeal with blueberries and a boiled egg

Lunch could be chicken wings with brown rice and sauteed squash and green beans

Dinner could be turkey meatballs with garlicky kale and roasted sweet potatoes

You don't need a recipe to eat healthy. You just need a basic framework that you can use to build up balanced meals. If you can get three out of the five food groups in a meal, you've done pretty good. Even better if you can get four in there! All five? You win!

Leftover Makeovers

Plan to use your leftovers with leftover makeovers. I like to roast whole hens for Sunday dinner. The house is filled with that amazing aroma and it looks great on a platter on the table. It makes me feel all motherly and domestic. More importantly, it saves me time and money the rest of the week because I have pre-cooked chicken available for quesadillas, stir fry, soups, omelets, salads and sandwiches. And I use the bones to make chicken stock, which is used in soups and cooking beans and greens.

Starting the week with large cuts of meat or large batches of vegetables saves me time as the week progresses and meals are composed of heat-and-serve elements instead of cooking from scratch daily. I know some people claim to not eat leftovers, and that's a nice luxury to have. Others have a full house, so leftovers don't ever happen. But if you can manage to do some batch cooking so that you cook once, eat twice, it will save you both time and money.

Leftover burger patties? Cut them up and turn them into the base for a pasta sauce or lasagna. Leftover pork roast becomes slow-cooker barbecue sliders another day. Leftover vegetables, rice and beans find their way into the soup pot or into quesadillas for a quick meal.

Batch Cooking

Batch cooking can be as simple as a sheet pan full of roasted vegetables that will get served up as sides, on salads or in soup. Or it can look like making batches of meals, like the meal prep kits, and having them packed up and ready to go. It's efficient too because once you turn that oven on to 400 degrees you might as well cook as much as you can! Foods like brown rice or beans that take a long time to cook, can be done in batches, then packaged up in small bags and containers to be frozen. Batch cooking allows you to cook once, but reap the benefits of those efforts many times over.

You can even prep in batches. When you get home from the market with your fresh produce, go ahead and chop and slice your vegetables and store them in resealable bags or containers. Then you can grab a handful of this or that and saute up a vegetable blend to go along with your pre-cooked proteins in a matter of minutes. Chop up an onion, add a handful of bell pepper and a scoop or two of zucchini and you have an instant side dish that can be stir fried or sauteed in minutes.

The beauty of leftover makeovers and batch cooking is that you really can cook once and eat multiple times. It also answers the "What's for dinner?" question that can be a stress trigger when it's 7 p.m. and you're just walking in the door after soccer practice and you actually have no idea what's for dinner and the evening just sort of dissolves from there. Using your freezer to store some of your batch cooking and leftovers means you have access to quick meals and ingredients that you can trust - because you prepared them yourself! Batch cooking works really well if you can pack leftovers for lunch (for you or the kids). You'll save money and make better food choices by not leaving the office to grab a fast-food fuel up at lunch time every day.

Appropriate Cooking Methods

Use cooking methods that free up your time. If you have proteins and vegetables already prepped you can saute, steam, stir fry, boil or grill them for a lightning fast meal. If you have larger cuts or want to do some batch cooking, slow cookers and pressure cookers can do all of the work for you without you having to babysit your roast or beans. Letting the oven do the work for other slow cook methods like roasting, braising and baking can free up your hands to help with homework or tackle a load of laundry. And a nice slow simmer on a back burner is a great

way to develop low-and-slow flavor for soups and sauces while you attend to other duties around the house - like the clingy toddler who has no intention of letting you actually cook.

Money

Every family is different. And every food budget is different. Depending on the number of mouths you have to feed, some of these tips will work better than others. For example, if you're a family of two, it may not make sense to buy in bulk because you'll end up stockpiling food, which may be ok for foods with a long shelf life like canned goods and dried beans, but not so much for produce that may go bad before you use it all.

Tips for Saving Money at the Store

Buy in bulk.	Make a meal plan.
Buy on sale.	Make a grocery list.
Buy in season.	Stick to your grocery list.
Buy local.	Do not shop hungry.
Eat less meat & dairy.	Shop high & low.
Eat more beans & legumes.	Go generic.
Pack your lunch.	Stock your pantry.
Eat your leftovers.	

Buying on sale saves money, especially if the store you shop at normally has savings cards, additional coupons or apps that can save you money. Shopping according to the sales can mix up your menu too if you've fallen into a food rut and feel like your family is eating the same dishes every week. Buying produce that's in season usually means you'll be buying it on sale too. When produce in season the prices tend to be at their lowest, and the produce at its freshest which is a win-win for you! Buying local means you'll be buying seasonal produce, because that's what the local farms and farmers markets will have to sell. It also helps to support your local economy by keeping your dollars in the community.

Meat and dairy are the two most expensive food categories. A lot of fat, sodium and dietary cholesterol also tend to come with meat and dairy due to the way we prepare the foods. Most people consume more than the recommended daily portion of protein. I grew up in the Deep South where you made half the plate meat and the other have butter-laden carbs. An army green overcooked vegetable might get crowded onto the plate, and a gigantic brick of cornbread that had its own plate rounded out the meal.

The MyPlate diagram can help us fine-tune what a balanced plate should look like. And if I'm following the MyPlate example, the first thing I'm going to do is reduce the size of my portion of protein and increase the size of my portion of vegetables. By reducing our protein consumption and eating more vegetables we naturally move toward a more balanced way of eating.



sources?

Everyone can benefit from tips like “Eat more beans and legumes” because they are a very affordable source of protein and fiber, both of which help you fill full and reduce the tendency to snack between meals.

Packing your lunch saves you from shelling out money on fast food and take-out for lunch while you're at work. It also helps you use up your leftovers. Plan what you can use your leftovers for when you're working on your weekly meal plan. This will also help you to use up your leftovers and reduce food waste.

Meal planning is the key to success if you want more healthy, home cooked meals. Meal planning helps you use up what you already have in stock at home, and keeps you from spending excess money at the grocery store. Meal planning is the first step in having a thorough shopping list that you can check against store sales and coupons for added savings.

Don't shop without a grocery list, even if you have to jot one down quickly while you're in the store parking lot looking at the weekly sales flyer. Shopping without a list pretty much guarantees you'll forget a necessary ingredient, buy things you didn't intend to get, or get suckered into spending more money because of some great deal propped up on an end cap. Don't fall for it!

Go into the store armed with your list, and make sure you're not hungry. When you shop hungry, everything looks delicious and necessary, but by the time you get home and unpack your groceries you'll realize you bought up a bunch of snacks or haphazard ingredients, but nothing you can put together to make a meal.

When you're at the store look high and low on each aisle. The major brands are placed at eye level, and they usually cost more. Generic and small label brands are stocked above and below the major brands and can save you money. Many store brands and generic brands are as good as major brands these days. So unless you have loyalty to a certain brand's quality, you can save money by purchasing the store brands.

The key to healthy meal planning, and successful quick meals is keeping a well stocked kitchen or pantry. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Just the basics and staples you'd need to round out a meal: dried herbs, spices and seasonings; condiments like vinegars, mustard, soy sauce; dried goods like rice, beans, barley and pasta; canned goods like tomato sauce, beans, chicken broth; proteins like canned tuna and salmon, peanut or almond butter; cereals, oatmeal, grits; canned and dried fruits, nuts and baking staples like baking powder, baking soda, flour, bread crumbs, cornmeal and sugar.

Well Stocked Kitchen

- Dried beans and lentils
- Rice & other whole grains
- Pasta and noodles
- Stock/Broth
- Frozen/Canned Vegetables
- Fresh vegetables and fruit
- Meat and fish
- Condiments
- Herbs & Spices
- Baking staples

If you combine the meal planning method to compose your shopping list, and keep a well-stocked kitchen, you can throw together a healthy meal in minutes.

Knowledge

In our digital age, learning to cook is almost a passive activity. Cable television has multiple cooking channels and shows. YouTube has open-access cooking videos for any type of cuisine you could think of. Entire Facebook pages are dedicated to recipes, cooking gadgets and cuisine buffs. There is a dirge of award winning cookbooks on every subject imaginable, and food blogs that will open your eyes to new worlds of culinary delights. The inspiration is out there, you just have to be motivated to apply yourself to actually cooking.

Many websites have newsletters you can subscribe to for free to receive recipes and cooking tips - daily if you want! I suggest subscribing to a few food websites and creating a folder in your in-box labeled Recipes. Whenever these tidbits come in, just drag them over to the Recipes file. That way when you have time to pursue and day dream about delicious meals, the inspiration is

right there waiting for you and you don't have to purchase a single thing. It's like having a perpetually updating, seasonally relevant cookbook at your fingertips whenever you want.

Cooking classes and demos are fun, and you get to eat! But they do cost money and they do have to fit into your schedule. However, if you have access to the internet, the information is out there. Simply search for a "Knife Skills Video" and you're on your way to chopping like a pro. Want to learn how to make dumplings? There's a video for that. Homemade mozzarella cheese from scratch? There's a video for that. Sprout grains for your own sprouted grain bread? Yep, there's a video for that. Need meal prep inspiration? There's a video for that, too. Pretty much anything you can think of, someone has posted a video for, and if they haven't, well you just found your niche, so get to work.

Taste

I'm not sure how "healthy" and "tasteless" became synonymous. Healthy food is delicious. Mangos are healthy. They are also delicious. Grilled salmon is healthy. And delicious. So grilled salmon with a mango salsa will be super healthy and super delicious.

Delicious food starts with quality ingredients. And by quality I don't necessarily mean expensive. I mean fresh. Buying the freshest ingredients you can get helps the overall appeal of your meals because the foods will be bursting with flavor and nutrients. When you have good ingredients you really don't have to do much to your food to bring out the flavor.

The best way to enhance the flavors of food is through herbs and spices. When leading cooking classes I'm always amused by how timid people are when adding dried herbs and spices. I am even more amused by the look of fear and trepidation on their faces when they see how MUCH I add to food. But when they taste something as simple as a turkey and vegetable chilli, the faces of those same Doubting Thomases light up. "Wow this is so good!" "Delicious!" "I was worried when I saw you adding all of that [insert spice] but this tastes great!" I often joke that I don't add a measly teaspoon of any spice. If I'm cooking with herbs and spices, it's go big or go home!

I want people to feel more confident in adding flavor to their food. If you're eating bland food it's like being in a stale relationship. Nobody wants that. You want food that is alluring, enticing, exciting, nurturing and bursting with flavor. Using good ingredients will get you close, but adding herbs and spices will get you all the way there. Fall in love with your food. Good food tastes good, feels good and is good for you.

I have noticed that fresh herbs tend to cause people consternation. Buying something and having it go bad in the crisper drawer is defeating and I often hear, "That's why I don't buy fresh herbs." But I've also seen how timidly people use herbs. With the strong-scented herbs (rosemary, sage, lavender) I can understand using some caution, but when it comes to home cooking, most meals could benefit from the whole handful or bunch of parsley, or mint or thyme. I've never had anyone's homemade chicken and thought "Gee, that's too much thyme." I have

never prepared a homemade dish and thought, “Wow, I was heavy handed on the parsley.” Never. So if you bought the herbs, use them. Don’t be afraid. Taste as you go and you’ll know when enough is enough. Trust your taste buds.

In addition to fresh and dried herbs and spices, I like to throw the flavors of citrus into the party. Nothing wakes up boring chicken breast like a fresh squeeze of lime and some freshly chopped cilantro. Citrus zest adds big flavor notes without the acidity of the juice. Simply use a hand grater to remove just the colorful skin of the citrus fruit and add that to your dishes for instant pop! You can store your zested lemons and limes in the refrigerator up to five days. Use them on your baked fish, in your iced tea, or squeezed over roasted vegetables where the acidity of the juice will brighten up the flavors of your foods and vegetables.

Juice from fresh limes and lemons can replace the salt shaker at the table, and help wake up the flavor of foods without the added sodium. In many cases, various vinegars can serve the same purpose. A splash of rice vinegar can wake up a not-quite-ripe tomato. A little apple cider vinegar is a zesty base for a homemade salad dressing.

A little chili goes a long way too. All peppers aren’t screaming hot, and can bring wonderful flavor to dull dishes. Poblano and Cubanelle peppers are two of my favorites because they are rarely spicy, but have lovely pepper flavor and can wake up earthy beans, boring chicken or bland brown rice.

Shame

Shame is the fifth and unspoken hurdle that keeps people from really taking on healthy eating practices. “What if I mess up?” Well, so what? You’re not being paid and you’re not being graded. This is all a learning and life-enhancing experience. If you learned something (a head of garlic isn’t a clove of garlic), then that’s a win. What would you do differently next time (read the recipe all the way through before starting)? Make a mental note of what you have learned and order take out. You can try again tomorrow! As with any skill - riding a bike, calligraphy, shooting three-pointers - the more you do it, the better you get. So let the perfectionism go - this isn’t baking, after all - and have some fun in the kitchen.

Do I have to cook?

Yes. If you want to control the quality and quantity of ingredients in your food you have to cook. If you want to support a healthy lifestyle, you have to cook, or pay someone to cook for you. If you want to save money, you will cook. Cooking can be fun, it can be social, it can be educational and it’s what all the grown ups and kids are doing these days. You will be amazed at how good your food can be, and your mother will be so proud that you finally learned how to eat like an adult. By cooking you’re also teaching your children how to feed themselves. I can’t emphasize enough what a valuable life skill it is to share with your kids. They will grow up and have to maneuver in this world on their own one day, and knowing how to be savvy shoppers and healthy eaters will hopefully help them save money, live well and eat deliciously.

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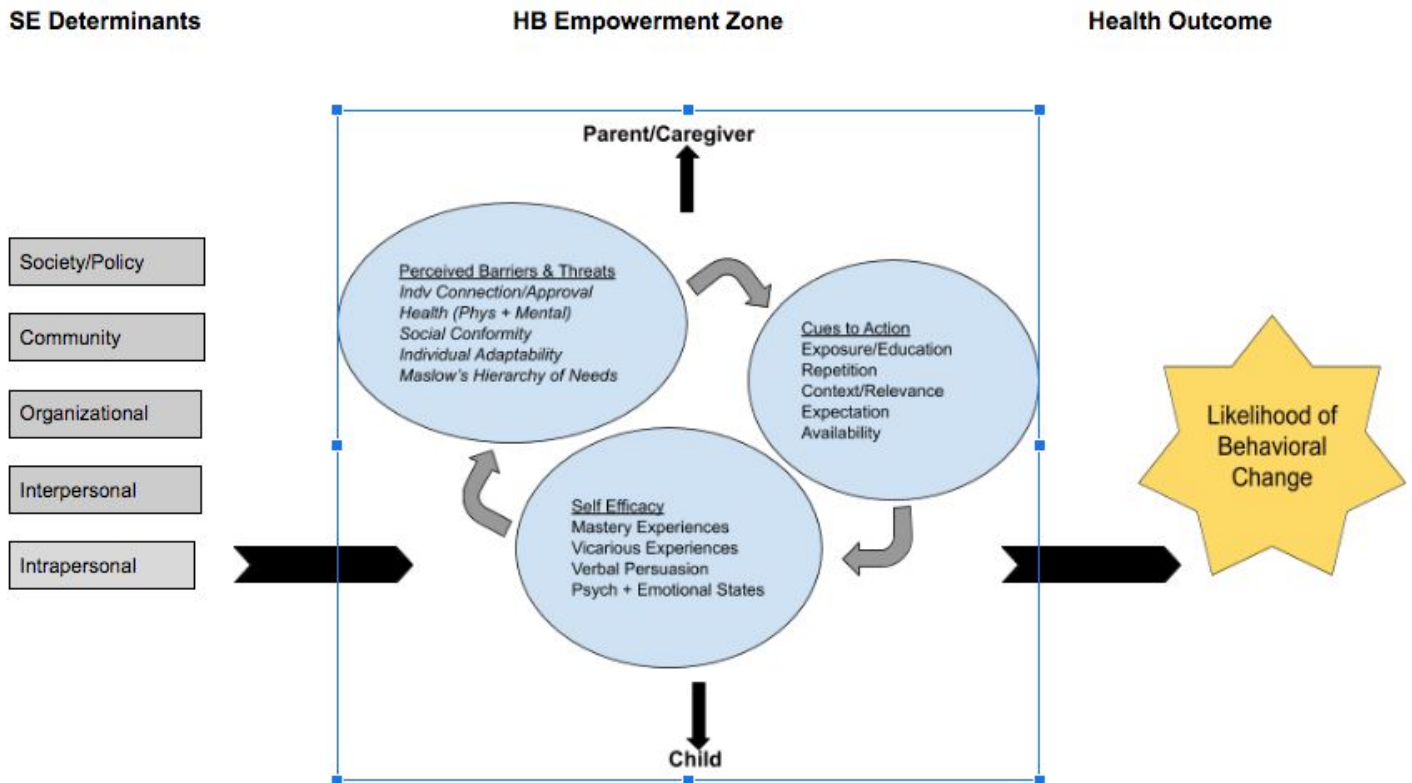
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Additional chapters from “How to Feed a Kid: The Guide” are in the Appendix

4: THE EMPOWERMENT ZONE



Fortunately raising kids doesn't happen in a bubble. While we looked closely at the role of parents and children in the development of the "phenomenon of picky eating" in Parts 2 and 3, we have to put it all in context of the world - the big picture. Parents/caregivers and children are all impacted by their environments (positively and negatively) in ways that affect their food choices. Now this section is going to help translate the theoretical framework into application, or real-world practice.

Perceived Barriers and Threats

As we have mentioned before, internal motivation is key to change. No external influence is as motivational as the internal drive to enact change. There is a belief that there are two primal emotions: love and fear. If we think along these lines, behavioral change might be brought about as a reaction to perceived threats to protect/nurture ourselves (an act of self-love) or the need to avoid harm/pain/threats to ourselves (an act of fear).

Positive behavioral change may be stymied as a reaction to perceived barriers/threats such as a perceived loss of love or an increase of fear for personal security. These needs are so primal that we may even be unaware that they are driving our decision making and actions, so it is useful to become aware of them in order to master our internal drives and make lasting and impactful behavioral changes. This is specific to food choices in this project, but can be applied across behavioral changes in general. Let's examine how perceived barriers and threats can either fuel or thwart behavioral changes regarding food choices.

Individual Connection/Approval: A child may take a bite of a new food that you offer just because they love and trust you. Depending on the temperament of the child, she may even present certain behaviors at the table, eat all of her vegetables, and say “please and thank you” all in an effort to appeal to your love. Some children try to connect by being what they think you want them to believe. Some people call this personality a “people

pleaser” but at their core all children want the love and approval of their parents/caregivers if they think they can get it. Unfortunately in dinner dramas, your love and approval may be withdrawn if you’re tired of fighting at meal times. In this case, children will feel your resignation or withdrawal of love which may evoke a fear response from them (although it may look like anger, stubbornness or anxiety). Over time, meals become a source of tension (not acceptance) for both you and your kid. This is a state of fear we want to avoid. Acting from love would include seeing someone for who they are, not who you want them to be, and meeting them at their level. That includes not shaming people for what they eat, not discrediting people based on what they believe or don’t know about food. Accepting cultural differences, experiential differences, and differences in taste and preference all help build a safe space around food where differences can not only be accepted, but explored and appreciated.

Health (Physical and Mental): Health can act as a strong stimulus for change when a person feels their life is being threatened (an influence of fear). As a health educator I’m aware that most of my audience is over the age of 35 years. This is the age when people start seeing the first serious preconditions or diagnoses of chronic disease, particularly diabetes and heart disease. For many people this is a “wake up call” and they embark upon learning about health and wellness to preserve their health while working to unlearn bad habits that have potentially led to their conditions. Also, anyone who has suffered from poor mental or physical health would be highly motivated to not return to those states (the influence of fear). On the other hand, someone who has experienced the

benefits of health may want to continue to do so, and may want to share their success with others to help others benefit from health (the influence of love). Think of modeling positive meal time behaviors as an act of love as, not only are you enjoying your meal, you're sharing this experience with your family with the hopes that they are also enjoying the meal.

Social Conformity: I witness this aspect of behavioral motivation most often as a teacher. Humans are pack animals and even if our pack is counter-culture, we tend to adhere to the rules of our pack. In the classroom, if one kid starts bringing in spicy hot chips, eventually most of them will. In my cooking classes we have a “one bite rule” for everything we prepare, and it is expected that every child will adhere to that rule. 99% of them do every time. It is easier to get a group of children to eat vegetables than to get an individual child to eat vegetables. That is the power of social conformity. So if social norms accept vegetables, if social norms exercise daily, if social norms embrace healthy behaviors then the majority of people will follow those norms, regardless of age. Your pack is your family, so making healthy behaviors a social norm of your pack is one of your responsibilities.

Individual Adaptability: We all have distinct personalities, and an individual's adaptability is a part of that. Some people are risk takers, others are risk averse, and most people fall somewhere in between. You have to respect your ability to adapt to change, and respect the ability of your kid to adapt to change (respect as an act of love). Throwing

out the junk food and serving salad at every meal seems like a great new beginning to you, but it may occur as a threat to a beloved tradition or way of life to your sweets-loving kid, and she may resist this change and may even internalize it as a personal attack. The child interprets the sudden change you've caused as a personal attack because she has identified their love for sweets as part of her identity. And now you and the child are at war. You are determined to make sweeping dietary changes, and the kid is determined to hold onto her way of life and her identity as a sweet-tooth having, sugar craving, candy lover (in other words, she feels threatened - fear). If you sense strong resistance to change from your kid, analyze the breadth and scope of the change you are trying to enact, and see if you can break it down into smaller steps that may be more receptive by a change averse child.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Abram Maslow introduced the model for behavior change in 1943 to represent the progression of human needs that must be met for a person to reach actualization. These are physical, mental and emotional needs that progress upward through the pyramid structure. I am a firm believer that increased self-awareness is essential for behavioral change. The five levels start at the base with Physical Needs, then progress up to Safety and Security, then through Love and Belonging to Self Esteem, and finally Self Actualization. It is important to bring Maslow's Hierarchy of Need into the conversation about "Perceived Barriers and Threats" because it is difficult to become self aware when you are struggling with basic human needs. For example, if your family's physical needs are unmet (food, water, clothing, shelter etc.), you are

unlikely to focus on the individual connectedness your child is or isn't feeling at mealtimes. In fact mealtimes aren't probably even a part of a reality that is based in the struggle for basic survival. Another example would be if you or your family have safety or security issues, it is unlikely that you will be weighing the individual adaptability of your kids. In times of emergency that threaten the safety of your family you will simply act in their collective best interest. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" acts a starting place to gauge whether or not an individual or family has their basic human needs covered before delving into the additional work of the other spheres illustrated in the Empowerment Zone. It is the first test in readiness for change. "Cues to Action" and "Self Efficacy" should be weighed against "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" as a sort of predictor of the potential success or failure of work done in the Empowerment Zone as they are dependent on a level of self awareness that is accessible when basic human needs are met.

If you refer to the Theoretical Framework in Part I, you'll notice that I mention some social determinants that affect everyone at different levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and society/policy. I want to use these tiers of influence to examine how positive influences can build in "cues to action," which are triggers that can motivate action toward positive behavioral change. The "cues to action" are in the "Empowerment Zone" of the theoretical model, where parents and kids kind of work through all the advice in this manual and figure out what works for them. The "Empowerment Zone" is where trial-and-error takes place

as everyone figures out what works for them, and families start to prioritize the values, expectations and behaviors they want for themselves.

To put it another way, this is where the difference between a “diet” and a “healthy lifestyle” take place. A diet is a quick fix, usually enacting some specific eating instructions that have been doled out, and it is usually temporary action with temporary results. A healthy lifestyle requires the accumulation of knowledge that gets road-tested and then assimilated into lifestyle choices and behaviors, usually with lasting results. In the “Empowerment Zone” parents and kids have opportunities to embody what they have learned through instruction, experience and experimentation. Parents and kids interact with these new skills in their environment and amongst their peers. This is an important distinction because the environmental and peer influences can contribute to the success or failure of new behaviors (this works in conjunction with the perceived barriers and threats).

Self-Efficacy

In the “Empowerment Zone” parents and children have the opportunity to practice and achieve Self-Efficacy. Self-Efficacy is achieved through:

- Mastery Experiences (new skills like learning to cook, balance a meal, meal prep)
- Vicarious Experiences (reading/hearing how others successfully achieved these skills)
- Verbal Persuasion (encouragement, positive feedback, support, family participation)
- Psychological and Emotional States (being open to learning, feeling confident in using new skill)

If a person makes the health-positive choice, despite perceived threats and barriers, despite peer or environmental influences, despite whatever old habits and social conditioning, then that person is using all of the tools developed inside of the “Empowerment Zone” to express self-efficacy. Parents and kids are capable of this expression of healthy behavior influenced by internal motivations and bolstered by learned skills and behaviors.

Cues to Action

The change we’re looking for inside of the “Empowerment Zone” are those behaviors that support healthy food choices by parents/caregivers *and* children. Therefore, this next section is going to examine these cues to action at different levels of the social determinants I mentioned above, and give some real-world examples of what positive change looks like in action. The cues to action are:

- Exposure/Education: opportunities for parents/caregivers and children learn new information, skills
- Repetition: repeated exposures to information, skills to allow children and adults to co-construct knowledge from their environment
- Context/Relevance: holistic learning that situates food in the natural world to have a better understanding of why food is important, where it comes from, the nutrition it provides

- Expectation: the influence of authority, peers and shared values on the behaviors and performance of children and adults
- Availability: access, affordability and availability of food and how that impacts the behaviors of parents/caregivers and children

Exposure/Education:

When considering Exposure/Education as a cue to action, think about all the places that we learn. Obviously school comes to mind - a formal setting for the transmission and receipt of information. But exposure begets education, as we learn naturally when we are exposed to new things. This is the insatiable curiosity that children naturally possess, and as we get older and more rigid in our ways this malleability of the mind lessens.

However, in order to bring about lasting and meaningful change, adults will have to reorient themselves to being receptive to new information, such as learning a new skill like how to cook, learning to appreciate new tastes and textures presented by healthier cooking techniques, learning new ways of planning and preparing meals, and learning new ways of socializing with food.

This personal commitment happens at the Intrapersonal level of the social ecology model and is closely tied with motivation. Motivation for behavioral change is often fed by perceived threats or harm to an individual. So for instance, if someone has a family history of heart disease they perceive that threat personally, and may be more motivated to make diet and exercise changes than someone who does not have a family history of

heart disease. If the benefits of having your family come together for regular meals outweigh the threats (dinner drama; time/money spent; effort to cook), then you're more likely to follow through with the plans you make for regular family meals. But *you* determine those benefits and threats personally, based on the exposure/education you have received.

By orienting yourself to be open to learning and experiencing new things, you can learn from this guide, or use resources available in your community, to strengthen your ability to make those regular family meals happen. The education, plus motivation, plus support of resources builds your self-efficacy when it comes to feeding yourself and your family and having regular family meals despite the challenges that may come up. For example, if lack of time is perceived as a threat to nutritious and timely meals, then being informed about meal planning, having a go-to slow cooker recipe, or being empowered to make good choices in the fast food drive through lane can all increase your likelihood to overcome the lack of time threat and *still* make healthy food choices for your family. You can overcome the threat despite the odds, because you are informed and empowered, but most of all you were internally motivated.

An immensely valuable educational resource for adults and kids are the Cooking Matters Programs (<https://cookingmatters.org/>) which teaches parents/caregivers how to plan, shop and prepare healthy and delicious meals on limited budgets. They have programs for teens and children as well, and many resources on their website, as well as in-person

community-based classes. You may also want to check out the chapter “Eating on a Budget” in this manual. The more you know, the more you practice these skills, the more confident you will be in making changes for you and your family in the direction of healthier meals.

A level of exposure and education that has effectively reached kids in school and preschool are Farm to School initiatives, which work to meld learning standards and objectives with enriching activities that teach kids how food grows, where it comes from, how to prepare it and how it nourishes their bodies. These lessons have been developed by many organizations and adapted for children as young as two and continue through highschool, as we have come to realize a lack of formal nutrition education has been a detriment to the population. Farm to School initiatives can look differently in each classroom and are flexible enough to apply to any number of learning objectives and curricular standards. Activities may be as simple as sorting and counting seeds and measuring plants as they grow, or as complex as examining the stoichiometry of chemical reactions during a cooking lesson.

One of the benefits of these integrative programs is that they use food as a bridge to connect educational dots for kids, and to bring that knowledge into real life where they can put it on a plate and eat it. Or where they can take it home and grow it. Or where they can experience and reproduce it for themselves. Farm to School initiatives represent the Empowerment Zone for kids because the activities are tactile, appeal to different learning

styles and make lasting impressions to the extent that research shows kids who have been exposed and engaged in Farm to School activities during their lifetime make different food choices. Consider these benefits of taste tests, which give children multiple opportunities to taste samples of vegetables and fruits in a school setting, detailed by “What Works for Health: Policies and Programs to Improve Wisconsin’s Health (2010):”

- *Taste testing fruits and vegetables as part of a multi-component intervention increases fruit and vegetable consumption among children, adolescents, and adults*
- *Taste testing fruits and vegetables is a suggested strategy to improve nutrition*
- *Exposure to and taste tests of fruits and vegetables have been shown to increase liking and consumption of fruits and vegetables among children overall*
- *[Activities like taste tests] may positively increase children’s healthy eating behaviors over the long-term*
- *Willingness to eat vegetables increases among 2 to 6 year olds whose parents provide them with taste testing opportunities*
- *Taste testing combined with cooking demonstrations in small food stores can increase healthy food purchasing and willingness to try unfamiliar foods among consumers of all ages*
- *Hands-on approaches that include taste testing such as cooking demonstrations and gardening activities are more effective than nutrition education alone to encourage children to taste involving students in food preparation decisions and offering different cooked preparations may improve palatability, increase tasting, and sustain consumption over time, especially for vegetables*
- *Combining vegetables with other healthy fats, proteins, and whole grain products can also increase palatability and encourage tasting novel foods or food combinations.*
- *When taste testing is part of a multi-component intervention, students’ preference for and consumption of fruits and vegetables have been shown to increase .*
- *[T]aste testing fruits and vegetables has also been shown to increase students’ familiarity with and*

willingness to try fruits and vegetables in some instances

- *Among 12-36 month olds, offering sensory experiences with food beyond tasting during playtime increases familiarity and tasting of vegetables in subsequent mealtime exposure*

Source: <http://whatworksforhealth.wisc.edu/program.php?t1=21&t2=12&t3=114&id=274>

To learn more about organizations spearheading these Farm to School initiatives, see the Resources section in the Appendix. Also seek organizations that may be mobilized in your community through community gardens, after school programs, cooking classes/clubs for kids, and other prominent community partnered organizations.

Repetition:

I have this learning theory that I call “The Eggplant File” to describe how kids learn about food. People have found this helpful, especially when exposing kids to new foods, new ways of cooking, new flavor combinations, or anything other than a diet of chicken nuggets and pizza. “The Eggplant File” combines some learning theories of constructivism with a little behaviorism for all the education nerds out there, and builds on Lev Vygotsky’s learning theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (Steven-Fulbrook, 2019). Constructivism believes kids create learning by building on their prior knowledge and experience. Behaviorism is kind of like conditioning, and ties learning to repeat conditions or stimuli. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development says that children and those they learn with co-construct knowledge, so the environment plays a huge part in children's learning. All that to say, I’ve really thought about this, and “The Eggplant File” is the end result: my own learning theory round kids and food..

Children are not blank slates. They are constantly deciphering information from exposure and how they interpret things based on their experiences and what they have learned and who they learn with. To that end, kids are co-creators in learning because they are bringing their own knowledge (be it of 2, 10 or 15 years) to the table. Children's social environment (formally in school, or informally through watching TV) can have a huge impact on how and what children think because they are constantly receiving, assessing, and processing information then accepting it or rejecting it for their own knowledge base. Sometimes the learning is soft as in informing a child's opinion of what's acceptable, "cool" or normal - like the time I brought my son sushi to the cafeteria when he was in 3rd grade as a surprise only to learn that that's apparently who you *do* in third grade. Sometimes it is hard learning like the steps/skills involved in scrambling an egg, or learning to identify what foods are high in fat/salt/sugar by reading nutrition labels, or experiencing which vegetables taste better when cooked with ginger and garlic. When it comes to opinions on food and food choice behavior, children learn through direct contact, observation and from the behaviors of others in their environment (Nekitsing, 2018).

So back to the eggplant. If you introduce a child to an eggplant for the very first time, they create a file on the desktop of their mind. It is labeled "Eggplant" and there's not much in it because this is the child's first exposure. As you talk about the eggplant and the child observes the eggplant, the child takes in bits of information: "this thing is a

vegetable, I'm supposed to eat it, it is purple." Then the child starts making assessments: "this is neither an egg nor a plant, this adult is clearly insane, it is also not a chicken nugget." Then the child accepts or rejects it: "since this adult is insane, and this is not a chicken nugget, I am not going to eat this."

This is where a lot of parents stop. The first time a kid frowns when they see a new food, spits it out when they taste a new food, or declares "Ew, that's gross!" over a new food doesn't mean that's all there is. This is just the beginning, the creation of the file. And this is where the behaviorism, or conditioning comes in. Parents and caregivers need to continue exposing the child to eggplant (stimuli) so that the child can learn to respond favorably to this "taste testing" or "one bite" new food experience.

So let's say the next time you prepare eggplant you make eggplant parmesan. It smells like foods this child likes - pizza, lasagna, spaghetti. There is even cheese and red sauce, oh joy! Odds are good a bold child might try it because of the positive association with other favorite foods. You still might get the "oh yuck" face though, as the child experiences the different texture and adds more to The Eggplant File: "definitely NOT lasagna, pizza or spaghetti." Yet if the flavor is close enough, you might get a second bite and maybe even acceptance instead of rejection. Either way that file now has more data and the child has more information about eggplant.

What if eggplant shows up on the grill the next time you barbeque? Well, the kid's file has plenty of good associations with grilling and the BBQ file is stuffed with delicious data. You may see some curiosity or excitement: "what's this crazy adult doing with eggplant on the grill? Good things come from the grill." You may be able to use that to entice another exposure to the eggplant. Will it be accepted or rejected? The child is still processing information but some things they may add to The Eggplant File are: "the adults like this eggplant thing, it keeps showing up, maybe eggplant is *normal*, maybe I should *accept* it."

This is one way that repetition informs a child's learning. It isn't about forcing a bite of eggplant, or lecturing about the health benefits of vegetables. It is about normalizing desirable foods and bringing the expectation that they are to be eaten to the experience. It is about co-creating an *experience* with the child because that's how they learn, by experiencing their world. It is almost like building a story of eggplant, revealing a little more about its character at each exposure. And it takes multiple exposures, 8-10, before a child accepts a new taste. In a study that compared interventions to increase children's consumption of vegetables, Nekitsing et al. (2018) wrote, "The strategy works by a process of familiarization and learned safety. According to the mere exposure theory, a single exposure is sufficient to produce a positive attitude towards a stimulus; thus, repeated taste exposure interventions promote positive acceptance over time." Some kids are adventurous and all for new experiences, and some are conservative and take time to warm up to something. There is a healthy dose of food neophobia at play here too, but

you can even work with that by using repetition to familiarize new foods, tastes and textures and normalizing this process of multiple exposures and experiences.

To be clear, this “Eggplant File” isn’t about making a child *like* foods. It is about creating a safe environment where experimenting and experiencing foods is expected, normalized and enjoyable. So tip to parents/caregivers: don’t be so quick to ask, “Did you like it?” If this is a child’s first exposure they may honestly not know whether they like it or not.

There isn’t enough information in the file for them to come to that conclusion. What they may or may not like instantly though, is the environment in which trying new foods makes them feel. They may not like pressure, all eyes on them. So instead of focusing on whether or not they liked it (remember, it took me *years* to like tomatoes and mushrooms), and instead focus on creating a safe space for a new experience and encouraging their input. “What do you think about it? What would make it better? Would you try it again?”

Context/Relevance:

Regardless of how kids and adults learn about food and nutrition, if the method isn’t couched in some sort of context then the meaning will be lost. That probably holds true for a lot of people. Meaningless facts tend to fade unless you can attach those facts to something in your world. I still remember the phone number to the house I grew up in, something I probably memorized in elementary school. I also remember my Girl Scout

Troop number. It isn't because these numbers are important, it is because they were bound concretely to my experience of life as I knew it.

Multi-sensory learning tends to stick with kids, which is why taste-tests are so valuable in nutrition education. In fact studies have shown that nutrition education alone isn't enough to change children's food choices (Battjes-Fries et al., 2017; Binder et al., 2020). And to be honest, multi sensory learning is more fun. If you can hold something, smell or taste it, if you can manipulate it by cutting it, or change the smell and taste by adding herbs and spices then the details that go along with that experience are more likely to stick.

I've often advised parents that kids will eat what they grow, cook or are invested in. It isn't a full-proof method, but it is highly successful. Children have personal ties to experiential learning, and tend to take ownership of the things they are involved in, whether it is a seed they planted, a garden bed they tended or a dish they prepared.

Parents/caregivers can leverage this by giving kids ownership over their food choices. I elaborate more extensively in the chapter Solving the Dinner Dilemma, but getting a kid's input on ideas or recipes used for family meals, having them help you shop, and letting them assist you in the kitchen are all ways to get kid buy-in on meals. Keeping the kids involved in the food choices and preparation for the family becomes an inclusive experience, and we already know about kids and experiences, that's how they learn. So it stands to reason, if you want your children to internalize or embody food nutrition

education then you need to include them in experiences where they can put food nutrition education to use. Growing and preparing food produces a tremendous amount of pride in children, and teaches practical life skills that will stay with them forever.

Parents also benefit from these hands-on experiences, which is why the Cooking Matters programs are so successful. Nutrition education seated in hands-on experiences with tasting opportunities offers rich, multilayered experiences and demonstrative opportunities that reflect real-world application of newly learned skills. The Cooking Matters classes teach, practice and offer recursive instruction that builds session to session. At the crux of this focus on learning is relevance and real-world application, in other words *meaningful* interpretation and application of newly acquired knowledge and/or skills. As we discussed earlier, perceived threat is a motivating force, however perceived mastery is also a motivating force. If we are educated on practices to help feed our families, have repetitious opportunities to evaluate this new knowledge or skill, and have a contextual seat for this knowledge or skill which makes this new information meaningful to us, then we have an opportunity to create new parameters for our existence and develop new patterns of behavior. This is at the core of the reframing of parental perspectives on dinner dilemmas, picky eating, and creating family meals.

Expectations

In Part 3, we really delved into the role that parents play in the “Phenomenon of Picky Eating,” and it was revealed that the more worried or fussy parents are about what their

children are eating, the more likely they are to have children that are picky eaters. Also the more controlling and limiting parents are about what their children are eating, the more likely they are to have children who are picky eaters. Finally, the more demanding and confrontational parents are about their children's food choices, the more likely they are to have children that are picky eaters.

Expectation deals with a person and their environment. People are expected to behave different ways in different settings. If parents expect a picky eater, they will most likely develop one. Parents soon learn that their children behave differently depending on the setting. They may behave one way at home and a different way in the classroom.

Children definitely behave differently in the classroom than they do on the playground.

Teens use language differently amongst their peers than they typically do when speaking with adults. This is all due to the expectations in each setting. In my after-school classes, most of the kids eat all of the foods their parents swear they don't eat at home. In my classes, it is expected that everyone will take one bite of the foods we prepare. It's in our Class Rules, and it is accepted as what we do. There is no cajoling, guilt, shaming, fussing, finger pointing, none of that. It is expected on an interpersonal level and it is accepted by each child and myself on an intrapersonal level. By contrast at a community and larger societal level, picky eating is expected, exploited by marketing and promoted by the media, and picky eating in children is accepted at those levels trickling down to influence the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

So maybe the advice that Dr. Spock doled out in the mid 1900s was more accurate than we realized at the time. Parents should relax this hyper-focus on their childrens' diets. I say that not to sound cavalier, but to shift our framing about picky eaters. Eating is a natural occurrence triggered by hunger cues (also naturally occurring). Food selection is based on what is available, - a variable parents/caregivers can control, which is why I repeatedly state: make nutritious meals at set meal times. The rest is truly up to the child. And if the child has had opportunities to experience self-efficacy and express their own agency, they may just surprise you with the choices that they make. This is why the "Empowerment Zone" in my theoretical framework is so powerful. As children and parents embody what they have learned, and test it in their environments, they are able to position themselves in a "seat of control" where their choices are educated and their behaviors are empowered behaviors, not reactionary. Empowered behaviors build empowered habits. That's the lifestyle change necessary for long-term health benefits.

Availability of Food:

In the previous section "Expectation," I touched on the availability of food. What and when food is available is the responsibility of the adults. Kids don't have incomes, don't drive to the store or restaurant, they don't shop and stock pantries. Despite any of the above mentioned "cues to action," if the food isn't available and accessible then this whole examination of picky eating is a moot point, as is the guidance of the framework behind *How to Feed a Kid*.

As adults, not just parents and caregivers, but members of society, it is our responsibility to make sure that children have access to food along with the other “cues to action” if we intend to improve the health outcomes of current and future generations. We cannot sit idly by and assume our government or schools will feed our children, and yes, they are all of ours whether by birth or not, because they are the future citizens that will govern our world. If we want to see a healthier vibrant future, then the wellbeing of the children of our nation is a concern of us all. Feeding them - and feeding them food, not food like substances - has to be a priority concern for everyone.

The Influence of Social Determinants on Food Choices

This is where the social determinants come back into play. It's fine and well that in my classroom, 25 kids get access to fresh produce, and that they are encouraged to practice building self-efficacy during class times. But the breakdown takes place when a child's home doesn't support or reflect these “cues to action”; when food isn't available; when food isn't nutritious; when food isn't even really food. This forces children to pit their worlds and beliefs against one another, and that isn't a way to encourage behavioral change. If anything, that situation is ripe for cognitive dissonance, and will diminish a child's determination to do “what's right” in the face of challenges, adversity, and contrary environments. This isn't only relegated to the behavior of children. Parents are also challenged daily between what they know they should do, and what they actually feel capable of doing.

If we want a healthier world, a healthier future, it starts with our shared responsibility to protect children's access to food, paramount to the other "cues to action." Awareness of how food choices are impacted by social determinants can help illustrate policies, institutions, systems, cultural values, and other influences that impact food choice behaviors for adults and children. Examples of existing structures to support the availability of food for children in the U.S. on a society/policy level are:

- National: the USDA's National School Lunch Program subsidizes school districts to provide free and low-cost lunches to students in low income households.
- State: CACFP and Summer Feeding Sites subsidize schools, daycares, and nonprofits that service children to provide free breakfasts, lunches and dinners to children.
- Local: School districts, and individual learning centers incorporate Farm to School Initiatives to include incorporating local foods into their menus which supports local growers and strengthens the local economy, and may increase the buying power of the school district to include more fresh food produce on its menus.

At the Community level, access to food presents challenges to specific populations while still having a broad reaching impact. Community based interventions are usually more fine-tuned than broader societal or policy based interventions, which lend potential for increased effectiveness.

- Urban/Rural: Some low-income urban communities are faced with social-economic inequities that result in food deserts where access to fresh produce is difficult. Children in agricultural communities typically eat more vegetables because it is built into the cultural

expectations of a community that makes its living growing food. Rural low-income communities are faced with similar food scarcity issues that urban children in food deserts face - accessibility, affordability and variety are all limited to what is available.

- Cultural Values/ Norms: In “Part 2: Exploring Picky Eaters” we examined the cultural shift that took place during the 20th century that led to the rise of the “phenomenon of picky eating.” The crux of the phenomenon is that picky eating behaviors are now expected and accepted as normal childhood experiences in the U.S. That is an acceptance that should be challenged to move the needle on the long-term health outcomes of the nation’s children.
- Media/Marketing: Part of the cultural acceptance of picky eating is the heavy influence of media and marketing which can be predatory when it comes to influencing the food choices that children make. We have examined the powerful influence that food-messaging has on children, and children’s influence of family food purchases. This is an area that should be regulated if the goal is to have positive long term health outcomes for families.

At the organizational level there are opportunities to impact smaller numbers of families, but to impact them in more sustaining ways that can help build self-efficacy for parents/caregivers and children. Schools, community centers, religious/spiritual organizations and workplaces all have marked influences on lifestyle choices of parents/caregivers and children. These institutions and organizations present culturally accepted norms and promote acceptable behaviors that are

internalized by families, making the organizational level one of significant influences in either supporting or denouncing behavioral change.

- Schools: We've touched on the effectiveness of Farm to School initiatives, and even how food plays a role in bridging curricular objectives and cultural inclusion. However, school cafeterias are usually overlooked as an educational setting. One that is widely underutilized to teach children about food expectations and nutrition education. School cafeterias are likely more focused on feeding as many kids as possible in as short a time as possible while maintaining the minimal nutritional standards required on a ridiculously restrictive budget.
- Religious/Spiritual Practices: Religious practices are a cultural influence which may determine that some foods are simply not a choice. In these settings, more often than not, the food choices made available to children are healthier across the board, and slightly more budget is allocated to those food sources. Religious/spiritual organizations can prioritize healthy eating behaviors and motivate heads of households effectively to make lasting impact on health outcomes.
- Workplace: The workplace has a tremendous impact on the choices that adults make for food choices. Time, transportation, budget and availability all impact adult food choices while working. In work environments that are not near fast food choices, workers tend to bring home made meals or eat from vending machines if a food court/cafeteria is not available. Work environments near fast food choices lead to an increase in fast food consumption. In work environments where health is prioritized, workers tend to make

better food choices especially if the workplace actively provided incentives, programs or food purchasing venues such as pop-up farm stands, food trucks or a cafeteria.

Perhaps the most influential level, the Interpersonal level, is where adults and children internalize learned behaviors which become part of their personal worldview and internal motivation. Changes at this level can be very impactful for both children and adults because they tie into the human socialization processes based on acceptance that eventually build into personal identity. As we have seen, the effects of positive social modeling, peer influence, and a persons' environment can all shift the framing that an individual has for what's acceptable or not for themselves regarding food choices and mealtime behaviors.

- Family/Household: The interpersonal relationships in a household have the most influence on a child's food choices. Strengthening the self-efficacy of food decision makers in a household will help create an environment that encourages and support healthy food choices for children.
- Social Networks/Peers: Peer influence has an influence on a child's food choices, however some of that is mitigated by the personality of the child. Some are more influenced by peers than others. Acceptance of health-based food choices in social networks/peers is highly suggested to encourage and promote the development of self-efficacy in children.
- Social-Economic Status: Availability of food, affordability of food, and access to food are all impacted by social-economic determinants and are not equitable across households. Changes at the socio-economic level correlate with changes in eating habits

and behaviors for individuals. Focusing on behaviors can help level the field by empowering parents and children with healthy eating behaviors that translate across socio-economic levels such as an increased focus on vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains, and a decrease in consumption of processed foods, refined sugars and high-fat foods.

At the Intrapersonal level, an individual can add or subtract value to a thought, belief or behavior. A person can test out an idea and see if it fits within their worldview, then accept or reject it. This is also where the internal motivation to enact personal behavioral change resides. Based on an individual's perception of personal threat or benefit, they can choose to prioritize, enact, continue or discontinue behaviors. What's important to note is that changes in perception on this level are born of acceptance and internalization of behavioral changes. This touches upon the spark that gets ignited when a person decides to make changes and accept those changes as part of their world view, their identity. And that is why changes at this intrapersonal level fuel long lasting behavioral changes.

- Parents/Caregivers
 - Beliefs and attitudes of parents/caregivers about food are often tied to those they grew up with and/or those presented in the culture/media.
 - Knowledge and skills of parents/caregivers about food preparation and nutrition are an often cited hindrance in their self-efficacy to feeding their families balanced meals

- Experience of parents and caregivers may influence their beliefs and attitudes about food, which they then project on to their children. This can work for or against pickiness food behaviors in children
- Children
 - Beliefs and attitudes of children about food choices is internalized from those of their caregivers, their culture/environment and media/marketing
 - Knowledge and skills of children is rarely expanded to enhance their self-efficacy in food choices, and is often hindered by the beliefs and knowledge of their parents/caregivers.
 - Physiology/Development of the physical child plays a role in food choices, whether through preferences of texture/taste, the ability to chew effectively, the caloric requirements and the individual personality/disposition of the child.
 - Experience: Positive experience generally have positive results in creating health eaters. The more exposure and experience children have in making healthy choices in their lives the better they will be at internalizing these behaviors as values and making them a part of lifelong behavior.

5: CONCLUSION

Summary

We have established picky eating as a common occurrence in young children, and a cause for concern by parents. This special thesis project developed a manual that used research and examples from my field experience to reframe picky eating, not as a behavioral disorder but as a common part of child growth and development that has been misconstrued by parents. The first section of the manual outlined the scope of picky eating and illustrated the theoretical framework upon which this guide was developed. The second section provided a historical context of the “phenomenon of picky eating” across the 20th century in the U.S., contrasted these behaviors to children in other countries, and presented possible predictors to picky eating. The third section of this manual focused on the research suggesting parents as the primary influencers on children with picky eating behaviors and provided chapters from “How to Feed a Kid: The Guide” to help parents navigate real-world situations with their families. The fourth section of this manual returned to the theoretical framework to help readers better understand their own internal motivations and to use the Empowerment Zone of the framework to create lasting behavioral change.

Discussion: Next Steps

Research Phase I : Prior to COVID 19 pandemic, I was set up to conduct qualitative research with children to include their voices in this manual. In my research I have found very little qualitative data from children, mostly from parents and other adults. Based on the theoretical construct supporting this manual, the children are equitable partners in the change toward positive food choices, and therefore their experiences and perspectives are valuable in the equations. Going forward I would like to conduct the research with children to include them.

Research Phase II: upon completion of the manual it can be used in an educational setting, along with the development of curricular materials for adults and children, in order to better teach and practice the suggestions in the manual. This would result in a multi-event class, participants would be part of the research to gauge whether or not the teachings from How to Feed a Kid 1) reduce the odds of pickiness in children; 2) improve the number of and quality of family meals; and 3) increase vegetable consumption by families.

Theoretical Research and Development: Continued development of the theoretical framework with closer examination and possibly synthesis of processes of additional behavioral change theories will clarify actionable items to develop curricula. Prochaska and DiClemente's transtheoretical approach will improve opportunities for parents/caregivers and children to enhance self-awareness and provide additional structure to inform curriculum and instruction, particularly in the Empowerment Zone. Bandura's triadic reciprocal determinism would be

useful in further strengthening the relationships between the “Social Determinants” and the “Empowerment Zone” by further illustrating the influence of the environment on a person’s behavior, and a person’s influence on their environment. In that sense, the arrow between the social determinants and the Empowerment Zone would be a two-way arrow.

Revision: Based upon the research in Phases I and II a revised version of How to Feed a Kid would be drafted to include best practices.

How to Feed a Kid Cookbook: A basic manuscript is already done for nearly 100 easy recipes to include with the manual. This reference is valuable in that it helps readers immediately begin to incorporate healthy recipes into their family’s repertoire. The recipes also reinforce teachings from the manual on planning, cooking and engaging family members in those skills.

Strengths/Limitations of the Methodology to develop the Manuscript

Developing a theoretical framework that is a hybrid of SEL and HBM proved to be a strength that embedded the work of the manual in grounded theory. While additional research and adjustments will strengthen this framework, one weakness is the consideration of “Perceived Barriers and Threats” without also considering “Assets and Resources” as part of the “Empowerment Zone” of the model.

Research for the manual was limited to studies in peer-reviewed journals, published from the year 2000 or newer, (unless contrast was desired - as in the influence of children on parents

purchases for food). Key search words included: picky eating, food messaging, marketing to children, farm to school, child development and eating

Due to socio-ecological barriers and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, families on the extreme low-income end of the economic bell curve are less likely to participate in research about picky eating as food access is a primary barrier, along with disposable income to support food choices, with concerns to waste or excess.

The onset of the COVID 19 pandemic made planned research impossible, which resulted in a pivot of focus and resources to developing the theoretical framework and review of literature to support the guiding chapters. The resulting time constraints placed limitations on the project.

Public Health Implications

With the reported prevalence of picky eating being so widespread, the goal of this manual is to help reduce the perceptions and behaviors associated with picky eating. Additionally, the instruction included in the manual encourages increased vegetable consumption (along with whole grains, lean proteins and fruits), in conjunction with making behavioral changes to implement the increased nutrition as a part of long-term behavioral change. Other behavioral changes recommended in the manual will increase the event of family meals and all of the benefits that come with that, while reducing stress at meal times for parents and children. The improved atmosphere at mealtimes and around food conversations in the family should improve

greater awareness of influences on food choice for both adults and children, and improve opportunities for nutrition education for both adults and children.

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APPENDIX

I. Additional Chapters:

Bitter Truth About Greens

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jlUJicgh8RP4sS36nyrUS6NsSDk1YbAfSpylelJIVuM/edit?usp=sharing>

Teeth

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/134X3UdYcN5ViOoR6iC81UGrDpaxzV90nrr9KdOhG5Js/edit?usp=sharing>

Feeding Young Athletes

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tWloldr8J5sXm3c917OXaLXkvctVkOWrDLBWzfzgCN4/edit?usp=sharing>

Healthy After School Snacks

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ipUk_hH3muyWmOy_5BoLMu537xS1Bgk2bGs9wa90ZIk/edit?usp=sharing

Leftover Makeovers

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1b0h-FDTwM3oEKu3iLOM2arODZIXb0VI3AiPUwlht4pE/edit?usp=sharing>

Hot/Cold Thermos Lunches

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NISEoCJhRX2wtc4pVICdeSaku2Wa11EItlU03E1xdYg/edit?usp=sharing>

II. Resources

National resources that support Farm to School initiatives:

- National Farm to School Network <http://www.farmentoschool.org/>
- Captain Planet Foundation <https://captainplanetfoundation.org/>
- HealthMPowers <https://healthmpowers.org/>
- USDA's CACFP <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp>

Farm to School or ECE resources in the state of Georgia:

- Quality Care for Children <https://www.qualitycareforchildren.org/>
- Georgia Organics <https://www.georgiaorganics.org/>
- Small Bites Adventure Club <https://smallbites.club/>