

# *iBlankie*

*every parent's security blanket*



## ***FOOD STRATEGIES***

# *INTRODUCTION*

For young children, food is love. And the love connection between you, your child, and food is very important. This article offers strategies to avoid food conflicts before they arise and to strengthen the loving, healthy connection between you, your child, and food.

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## *DON'T FIGHT OVER FOOD*

Minimize power struggles over food. You can provide healthy options in food choices and family meal opportunities, but you cannot force your child to eat and you cannot force your child to eat certain foods. Power struggles over food are useless and counter productive. If food is love to a young child, we want to be very careful how we interact with our child concerning food. Certainly we need to set appropriate limits around unhealthy choices, but we also need to be thoughtful about our approach to food, food choices, meals and snacks.

## *MANAGING MEALS*

### *Breakfast*

Sometimes people, including children, are not hungry for breakfast. Since most nutritionists say that this is the most important meal of the day, this can be problematic.

For some children, it is the choice of typical breakfast foods that they find uninteresting. If your child is bored by breakfast offerings, think about serving lunch or dinner foods for breakfast. Your child may be interested in a turkey sandwich, a piece of healthy pizza, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, chicken nuggets, soup, roast beef or fish sticks for breakfast. Expanding the typical breakfast selections to include all meal options may pique your child's interest.

For some children, they are just not morning people and need some extra time to wake before eating. If mornings are hectic and your child does not want to eat right away, sometimes packing a car snack can help. Calling breakfast-on-the-go a car snack, a motor meal, a light bite, or a morning munchie may defuse a power struggle with a child that insists they don't want breakfast. Breakfast by any other name is just as healthy and may go down a little easier. You can try packing waffles or fruit slices or oatmeal (you can call it O-on-the-Go) in a Ziploc bag, plastic container or thermos for eating as they play or inroute.

If your child isn't interested in food at home or in the car, be sure that there is a non-perishable snack in their backpack when they are dropped off at childcare or school so that they don't have to wait until lunch. Be sure to ask the caregiver or teacher to check in around 9:30 or 10am to see if your child needs to eat in case the group doesn't have a scheduled snack.

Sometimes preparing for breakfast the night before, by you or by you and your child together, can be helpful. Setting out placemats and cereal bowls and spoons or a waffle iron or jars of peanut butter and jelly can set the stage for a healthy breakfast and save some morning time. Sometimes this can be a planting of the seed for a healthy breakfast, acting like a rehearsal for the morning meal.

## *Snacks*

For many children, snacks are as important as meals. Many children are hungrier between meals than at mealtimes. If we are following the important guideline that children eat when they are hungry, then they should eat at mid-morning and mid-afternoon if that's when they are hungry. Nutritional snacks are as important as nutritional meals.

Snacks can be viewed as mini-meals, that is, borrowing from regular meals, rather than as interim food to tide your child over until the next meal. Why not serve half a cheese sandwich for snack and then the other half at lunch? Why not serve some of the turkey and peas from dinner for their 3pm snack? The nutritional value of snack foods plays a crucial role in your child's overall nutrition.

## *FOOD FREEDOM*

### *Your Child's Snack Drawer*

The idea of a snack drawer is to have an array of healthy choices that your child can provide for themselves. This certainly encourages autonomy, although you may need to be an open-the-peanut-butter-jar team.

Have a drawer in your kitchen that is low enough and easy enough for your child to open on their own. Fill this with non-refrigerated nutritional foods that your child likes. Be sure your child will have easy access to the food; for example, for cereal and crackers pre-open the boxes or re-container for easy access. Label this snack drawer with a photo of your child and/or with their name or a picture that they have drawn.

You may want to review the supermarket ads from the newspaper with your child to gain ideas for their snack drawer. You may want to have your child involved in a grocery shop to fill their own snack drawer or you may want your child to help you make a list of foods for their snack drawer. Or you may want to supply the snack drawer yourself—trust your instincts and do what you think will work most smoothly. You may want a separate drawer for each child if you have more than one child or you could do several large plastic containers within one drawer or cabinet.

A snack drawer can also bypass food struggles during mealtimes or snack time. If your child doesn't like what is on the dinner table or what is on the snack plate, then it is easy to respond, *"I see that you are not interested in eating what is set out for dinner/snack. Please feel free to find yourself some food to eat from your snack drawer."* This approach encourages your child's independence concerning their food choices and eliminates your needing to provide an alternative food choice for your child—they can provide the alternative.

Your child doesn't have to like or eat what is served, but you don't have to cater to their every food whim. If your child chooses not to eat what is presented, then they need to assume some responsibility for preparing an alternative. For a very young child you may need to provide a good deal of assistance, but hopefully not provide total preparation.

When my children were little, our family had wildly varying food preferences and tastes. Being the overprotective mother that I was—so eager to please and so anxious for my children to eat— for years and years I made four different dinners every night to accommodate everyone's dinner needs. Yes, you could call this "crazy." Boy, do I regret all that—I was so burned out from cooking after my children went to college that I barely cooked a meal for years. And I deprived my children of the opportunity to take responsibility for their own food choices and to prepare some of their own meals. I hope that other parents can benefit from my nuttiness!

### *Your Child's Refrigerator Shelf*

Have a refrigerator shelf low enough for your child to reach, although they may need help opening the refrigerator door. Fill this shelf with nutritious foods that your child can eat. As much as possible, include foods that they can manage themselves. Pre-sliced fruit and vegetables, cheeses, yogurt, or other foods in easy-to-open containers, etc., would be good choices.

As with your child's snack drawer, you may want to have your child involved in a grocery shop to fill their Refrigerator Shelf or you may want to provide these yourselves—trust your instincts.

This Refrigerator Shelf is used in the same manner as your child's Snack Drawer as described in the previous section.

## *SHAPING YOUR CHILD'S DIET*

### *Encouraging Healthy Choices*

You can encourage your child's healthy food choices in several ways.

#### *HELP YOUR CHILD TUNE IN TO THEIR BODY*

Encourage your child to identify their hunger, thirst, or energy needs and to eat when they are hungry and not to eat when they are not hungry.

*"Dylan, I like the way you looked inside yourself and realized that you were hungry and that you wanted to eat some grapes."*

*"It's good that you can know you are not hungry now at dinner time and that you don't need to eat. When you feel hungry later, Isabela, then you and I can get you some healthy food from your snack drawer. Or I can save your dinner plate in the fridge for later. Let's spend time talking now at dinner time."*

*"You are taking good care of your body, son, by having that big glass of water since you are tired from running around outside playing soccer. Good choice, good self-care."*

### *BE A MODEL*

*"One parent is worth a thousand teachers." —ancient Chinese proverb*

The power of modeling healthy food choices for yourself can never be underestimated. How you eat, when you eat, and what you eat are all strong influences and examples for your child. It is important that you be aware of your own food choices—healthy or less healthy—and perhaps comment on these choices when your child is present. Comments from you, with no reaction needed or expected from your child, plant the seeds for healthy choices. Your child is watching, listening, and imitating your behavior.

*"I am so hungry for a snack now in the middle of the afternoon. I am tempted to have some candy, but I know that my body needs some healthy food to take away my hunger and to give me energy. I can have candy another time—now these apple slices spread with peanut butter are better for me."*

*"Breakfast is such an important meal—I love some eggs and whole wheat toast and juice. It helps me get off to a cheery start each morning."*

### *ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR CHILD'S HEALTHY CHOICES*

Provide positive reinforcement for good decisions.

*"Adama, you are taking such good care of your body when you make that choice to have granola and milk for breakfast. That will help your body stay healthy and strong."*

*"I like the way you are choosing a cheese snack from your refrigerator shelf. Izzy, you are making a good food choice that gives your body energy and that will help you grow."*

## *TICKLE YOUR CHILD'S SENSES*

Your child explores their world through their senses. When talking about food with your child, enrich their sensory experience by speaking about several senses involved in their eating. Talk about how the orange smells, have them feel the bumpy skin of the avocado, remark on the color of the apple.

*"Serafina, you are really enjoying that apple. The skin is red and it's so crunchy that I can hear you taking a bite. The inside is so sweet and tart and juicy. Fruit is nature's candy."*

*"Pudding is so creamy and smooth. I love the way pudding feels soft and cool on my tongue. And it smells delicious, too. I love the smell of chocolate."*

## *CONNECT YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR AND FOOD CHOICE*

Help your child see the connection between their behavior when they are hungry or thirsty and also between their behavior and the food they eat. Your young child will probably not understand this connection, but you will be planting a seed that will come to fruition when they are older.

*"Jill, you are so cranky. I think that you may be hungry and running out of gas and that if you eat something you may have more energy and be less cranky."*

*"I am wondering how you are feeling, Roberto. You were calm before snack time and then you had that birthday cupcake and now you seem all revved up. Sometimes sugar can make your body more excited. How does your body feel?"*

*"We all need water to give us energy. Now that you've had that glass of water, Jamal, you seem to be more alert and have more energy."*

## *Limiting Less Healthy Choices*

One person's junk is another person's treasure. And, unfortunately, for some children stereotypical junk food can be what they crave. Sometimes less nutritious food with excessive sugar or salt or empty calories can be what your child wants.

While encouraging your child's autonomy, certainly there need to be limits on your child's less healthy choices. Sometimes moderation is the key to limiting certain foods and sometimes total elimination at home is the key to setting limits.

## *MODERATION OR ELIMINATION? OCCASIONAL TREAT vs. FORBIDDEN FRUIT*

Occasional treats should be included in a child's diet, especially at special times—cake and ice cream at birthday parties, hot dogs at baseball games, ice cream cones after a movie. Celebrating with treats can be an especially sweet and powerful family bonding experience.

When you think of some of the special times in your own childhood, these times often include special food. I remember visiting my grandmother in Brooklyn once a year and how she would take homemade seltzer water and add lots of raspberry syrup to it for a sweet soda. I can remember my favorite aunt, Aunt Thelma, baking her special mandelbrot (think: Jewish biscotti) which I still bake from her recipe today. I make my mother's pumpkin pecan pie every Thanksgiving. Sweet food memories.

If some foods are totally eliminated from your child's diet, sometimes this can result in the forbidden fruit effect, where your child wants it even more. Sometimes less healthy choices should be offered occasionally as a special treat so that particular food doesn't become so compelling that it takes on a power of its own. Moderation toward less healthy food can sometimes be learned more easily when there is a choice rather than total elimination.

When I was growing up, my mother never kept candy in the house. All of us children craved candy. I can remember as a teenager when I baby-sat for families with a candy jar that it required all my willpower not to go crazy eating the candy. Candy still feels like forbidden fruit to me. In my childhood I missed out on the opportunity to learn to regulate my sugar needs.

If it isn't at home, your child can't eat it. If unhealthy food choices are not available in your home, then this often makes things easier. For your child, not having lollipops in the house can still be a trigger for a tantrum, but usually after several days of hearing, *"There are no lollipops anywhere in the house,"* your child will adapt to reality. If the limited or eliminated treat is nowhere in your kitchen, then that power struggle is, essentially, useless for a child.

Sometimes I work with families where the parents love candy, but want to restrict their child's sugar intake. I suggested to one mom that she take her beloved M & M's and put them in an empty bag labeled for frozen peas and put them in the freezer and only eat them when her child was not around. It worked like a charm for both mother and child.



## *SETTING LIMITS ON FOOD CHOICES*

An important part of setting limits on less healthy food choices is to establish guidelines before-hand that are important to you. This may be one of the hardest parts of setting food limits—defining your own guidelines around your child’s eating. Do you want your child to have no sugar? No soda? Only one sweet a day? One sweet a week? Only chips at Grandma’s? Never meat? Never hot dogs? Only organic food? And circumstances change—what about restrictions at a friend’s birthday party? A sleepover with cousins? A visit to the beach? When you and your child are on a car trip and tired and the only choice is gas station snack food?

Parenting teaches us about flexibility. If we’re not flexible, we are dead in the water. Or, as Carolyn Hax says, *“One purpose of children is to shred the black-and-white of parenting into grey confetti.”*

Thinking in terms of guidelines and plans, rather than strict limits, can be helpful. It seems important to have strong guidelines on what are acceptable healthy choices and what are occasional treats and to try your best to stick to these guidelines. But this is the real world—adhering to your healthy food plan depends a lot on your energy level and the situation and the food choices available at that time.

A realistic goal is to have your child make healthy food choices the vast majority of the time.

Should you find yourself in a power struggle with your child over food, the best options out of the power struggle are: negotiation, diversion, distraction, and, if need be, take your child out of that particular environment.

## *SUGAR, SUGAR, SUGAR*

In my experience, 99% of children like sugar and 99% get more active after eating sugar. It is best to consider carefully how to include sugar in your child’s food choices.

Developmentally it is thought that babies have a special biological preference for sugary food because the sugar provides energy and helps with surviving. For many children, this craving for sugar continues.

In terms of children’s behavior and sugar, there have been conflicting research reports about the effects of sugar on children.

In my experience, when a child has sugar, their behavior changes within approximately 30 minutes. When I taught preschool and we celebrated birthdays, we always served the birthday cupcakes 20 minutes before the children were picked up by their parents at the end of the school day so that we didn’t have to deal with the sugar high! I even tested this sugar kick-in time at my own children’s birthday parties and found that the 30-minute time frame post-birthday-cake was the same up through ages 10!

Sometimes the easiest way to limit sugar is not to have any sugar in the house. Sometimes the easiest way to regulate sugar is to set limits on your child's sweet intake.

My daughter craved sugar when she was little. Beginning at age three, I told her she could have one sweet a day of her choice, any time of the day. Sometimes she had a lollipop with breakfast and then later had a tantrum because she wanted another sweet (I told her that it was clear that she had made a choice earlier that wasn't working for her later.) Having this rule helped put the responsibility on her shoulders. She had some freedom of choice within the limits and structure that was established.

It can also be helpful to have your child monitor how they are feeling before and after eating sugar, although having them focus while sugared up may be difficult.

### *WEIGHT ISSUES: OVERWEIGHT? UNDERWEIGHT?*

Your child's pediatrician should be consulted regarding your concerns about your child's weight issues. You may also want to consult a nutritionist for dietary advice. Although genetics can play a part in your child's weight concerns, certainly healthy food choices, age-appropriate food quantities, and exercise should be a part of any child's daily food and activity regimen.

Your young child will often have a difficult time understanding the relationship between their appetite and food needs and their being underweight or overweight. The best approach is to provide a great deal of verbal encouragement when your child is making good choices—paying attention to their body's messages around hunger, making healthy food choices, exercising, and being a part of Your Family Food Team. The strategies mentioned above for fostering healthy food choices and limiting unhealthy food choices are guidelines for helping your child with any weight concerns.

It is important to address the emotional and social concerns that can occur if your child is underweight or overweight. Here are some important guidelines:

- Your focus should be on your child's health—their healthy food and activity choices—and not on your child's weight. Your child needs your help in learning to monitor their internal body cues. Your child also needs you to partner with them in finding appetizing and interesting healthy food choices. Your child needs your encouragement and appreciation for their healthy attitudes and healthy choices.

*"Brooklyn, you made a healthy snack choice. That pear will give you energy and help you grow so tall and strong."*

*"I see that you have stopped eating your hamburger. You left a few bites on your plate. Good job for checking in with your body to see that you were full. You did a great job of listening to your body."*

*"Yahoo! You were awesome, William! You turned off the tv and grabbed the soccer ball so you could go kick it around outside. Fun choice that is wonderful for your body."*

*"You had a cupcake after lunch and you seem antsy. What is happening in your body? Sometimes sugar tastes good, but it can make our bodies get real wiggly. Less sugar is better than more sugar."*

- Bullying by siblings or peers should not be tolerated. Bullying is an adult problem; your child should not be expected to handle bullying about their weight on their own. If there is teasing at school, then the teacher and school staff should be informed and have a plan to allow for zero tolerance for bullying.

### ***Food Restrictions: Allergies, Sensitivities, Religion & Family Preference***

There can be emotional and social consequences for a child who must limit their intake of certain foods due to allergies, sensitivities, religious restrictions, or family food preferences (such as vegetarianism). Using respectful strategies and sensitive words can ease a child's feeling different about themselves when there are foods that they are not allowed to eat.

#### ***SOCIAL STRATEGIES***

For children with food restrictions, there can be social awkwardness or sensitivity with their peers on a day-to-day basis at snack or lunch or during special events such as holidays or birthday parties. Your child may feel left out and different if they cannot eat the food that is offered. Your child may feel fine having you prepare or bring special food for them to eat or they may feel uncomfortable eating their own food that they brought. If they do feel uncomfortable being different, you may want to consider bringing enough special food for them to share with all of the others at the gathering so that they can feel generous and more a part of the group's shared-food experience.

You may also want to help your child by suggesting some phrases they can use in case another child questions them about their food restrictions.

*"I can't eat that birthday cake because it makes my body feel tired. I am gluten-free and don't eat white flour. I brought some special gluten-free cupcakes to share—would you like one?"*

*"I can't eat cheese because my body is uncomfortable with cheese and it upsets my tummy."*

*"I can't eat peanuts. Peanuts upset my body."*

*"I don't eat pork. It is one of our family rules."*

*"I never eat bacon. It is against my \_\_\_\_\_ religion."*

*"My family doesn't eat meat. We only eat vegetables. I am not allowed to taste that hamburger."*

## EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Most young children have a hard time feeling different. Reading appropriate books about how your child may be feeling different, be it allergies or sensitivities or religious or family preferences, can be very helpful. There are numerous books available for children that address these food restriction issues.

You might also want to make up some stories with your child that could be helpful, stories such as: *"Sasha, the Squirrel Who Couldn't Eat Peanuts"* or *"Damian the Dragon Who Couldn't Eat Pork."* When telling these stories, be sure to include some emotions that the animal or character might be feeling, such as feeling sad or different or left out, as this will help normalize what your child may be feeling. Also, be sure to have the hero/heroine discuss their feelings with others. Then have the story come to a resolution where the main character feels better about themselves and feels understood and accepted by their peers.

You can also act out the above stories with puppets or using dolls or animal figures or even cars (perhaps Lightning McQueen can only take in one certain kind of gas!?). Stories using your child's favorite type of play can be very helpful.

You set the emotional tone at mealtimes. It is important for you to feel relaxed and nourished to have harmonious mealtimes.

## FAQ

### **Q. My child has lots of snacks and juice between meals, but won't eat meals. What should I do?**

It is important to think of your child's food intake in terms of the entire daily picture. If your child grazes throughout the day and isn't that interested in meals, then think of their snacks as mini-meals where you might serve half of their lunch for a 10:30am snack and the fruits and veggies from dinner for their 3:30pm snack.

In terms of juice, the high sugar content of juice can satisfy a child's appetite but not provide all of the vitamins and minerals that are needed. Sometimes watering the juice down can help. Offering water with a twist of lime or lemon and calling it a lemon or lime spritzer rather than water may be enticing to your child. You can also offer water with a squiggly or character straw to make it more interesting.

### **Q. My child doesn't eat dinner and then is hungry at bedtime. This causes nighttime struggles. What should I do?**

There shouldn't be a punishment or deprivation experience for your child's not being hungry at dinner and then being hungry later.

Parents often complain to me that their child doesn't eat dinner and is then hungry at bedtime. They often say that they refuse to offer any food at that time since the child should have eaten dinner. However, your child's stomach doesn't always run by the clock. If an important goal is for your child to eat when hungry, then your child needs a snack at bedtime if they are hungry. You can even ritualize this as part of their bedtime routine or you can wait for your child to ask for a bedtime snack.

My children often had the bedtime ritual of Grahams and Milk (milk has tryptophan and encourages sleep). This "breaking of bread at bed" can be sweet together time at the end of the day.

When in doubt about some of these food decisions, taking the decision to the adult level sometimes clarifies this. We need to afford children the same respect for their listening to their body's food needs as we afford ourselves.

Sometimes when I sit down to dinner I am not hungry, especially if I have been sampling while preparing dinner. If I'm not hungry at dinner and don't eat much, then if I am hungry at bedtime I have a snack to tide me over until breakfast. This feels respectful of my body's needs and guarantees that I won't wake up in the middle of the night because I am hungry.

In addition, children and adults sometimes use food to feel better when they are bored, sad, worried, or upset, but eating doesn't really cure any emotional or social challenges. It is important that you partner with your child in eating if and only if they are hungry to avoid fostering patterns where food becomes a defense to avoid certain feelings.

## ***SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING***

For a young child, food is love. And the love connection between you, your child, and food is very important. This article explored words, strategies, and skills to avoid food conflicts before they arise and to help strengthen your connection with your child regarding food.

The information in this article is contained in an expanded version in the [Food and Your Child: Healthy Attitudes and Harmonious Meals](#), a 32-page article offering techniques and strategies to foster your child's healthy food attitudes and to smooth mealtime conflicts. iBlankie also offers [Mellow Mealtimes](#), a 13-page article focusing on mealtime tips and strategies.