

iBlankie

every parent's security blanket



HEALTHY ATTITUDES & HARMONIOUS MEALS

CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	4
<i>HEALTHY FOOD ATTITUDES</i>	4
Food is Love	
Four Healthy Food Attitudes for Your Child	5
ATTITUDE #1: YOUR CHILD EATS WHEN THEY ARE HUNGRY	
ATTITUDE #2: MAKE HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES	
ATTITUDE #3: CHILDREN ARE INVOLVED IN FOOD PREPARATION	
ATTITUDE #4: MEALTIME IS CONNECTION TIME	
Four Healthy Food Attitudes for Your Family	6
ATTITUDE #1: MINIMIZE POWER STRUGGLES OVER FOOD	
ATTITUDE #2: MEALTIMES ARE FAMILY SOULTIMES	
ATTITUDE #3: HAVE AGE-APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS	
ATTITUDE #4: CREATE A FAMILY FOOD TEAM	
<i>MANAGING MEALS</i>	7
Breakfast	
Snacks	
<i>FOOD FREEDOM</i>	8
Your Child's Snack Drawer	
Your Child's Refrigerator Shelf	
<i>SHAPING YOUR CHILD'S DIET</i>	9
Encouraging Healthy Choices	
HELP YOUR CHILD TUNE IN TO THEIR BODY	
BE A MODEL	
ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR CHILD'S HEALTHY CHOICES	
TICKLE YOUR CHILD'S SENSES	
CONNECT YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR AND FOOD CHOICE	
REFLECT ON YOUR OWN NEED TO SEPARATE AND LET GO	
Limiting Less Healthy Choices	11
MODERATION OR ELIMINATION? OCCASIONAL TREAT vs. FORBIDDEN FRUIT	
IF IT ISN'T AT HOME, YOUR CHILD CAN'T EAT IT	
SETTING LIMITS ON FOOD CHOICES	

SUGAR, SUGAR, SUGAR	
WEIGHT ISSUES: OVERWEIGHT? UNDERWEIGHT?	
Food Restrictions: Allergies, Sensitivities, Religion & Family Preference	15
A LARGE SIDEBAR ABOUT FOOD ALLERGIES AND SENSITIVITIES	
SOCIAL STRATEGIES	
EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES	
<i>MELLOW MEAL TIMES: GUIDELINES, PROPS, GAMES & YOUR FAMILY FOOD TEAM</i>	18
Guidelines for Preserving Your Sanity	
GUIDELINE #1: NOURISH YOURSELF—ON MANY LEVELS—BEFORE YOU FEED YOUR CHILD	
GUIDELINE # 2: THE BEST DINNER CAN BE THE DINNER YOU DON'T PREPARE	
GUIDELINE # 3: HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR CHILD	
Props	21
PROPS FOR STRUCTURING CONVERSATION	
PROPS FOR TABLE-SITTING	
PROPS FOR CHANGING THE MEALTIME SCENE	
Games	22
MOST FAVORITE LEAST FAVORITE GAME	
I SPY	
OTHER GAMES	
Your Family Food Team	22
FOOD PLANNING	
GROCERY SHOPPING	
FOOD PREP	
TABLE PREP	
FOOD CLEAN-UP	
<i>FAQ</i>	25
PICKY EATERS OR SELECTIVE EATERS?	
SNACKS AND JUICE, BUT NO MEALS	
FOOD AS REWARD? WITHDRAWING FOOD AS PUNISHMENT?	
NOT HUNGRY AT DINNER, THEN HUNGRY AT BEDTIME	
EATING AT GRANDMA'S	
YOUR OWN FOOD HISTORY	
<i>SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING</i>	32

INTRODUCTION

For young children, food is love. And the love connection between you, your child, and food is very important. This article explores the emotional and social role of food in your child's life and in your family life. As children grow and individuate, parents experience the delicate balance between providing for their child's nutritional needs and fostering their child's independence concerning their food choices. This complex process sometimes results in challenging power struggles concerning food, often at mealtimes.

Healthy Attitudes and Harmonious Meals examines the important relationship between you, your child and food. This article offers strategies to avoid food conflicts before they arise and to encourage your child's healthy attitudes toward food. Techniques are explored to reduce power struggles at meals so that mealtimes are times of important family connections. This article explores healthy food attitudes and provides words, skills, and strategies to help strengthen the loving, healthy connection between you, your child, and food.

iBlankie also offers [Food Strategies](#), a 13-page article on tips in relating with your child on food issues, and [Mellow Mealtimes](#), an 13-page article offering strategies for more peaceful meals. The information contained in those two articles is included in expanded form in this article.

HEALTHY FOOD ATTITUDES

Food is Love

For your young child, food is love. From your child's birth, how you interact with your child regarding food is connected to how they feel nurtured and loved. From the beginning, your child is dependent upon you for food; how well your child's basic needs for food are met can shape how comfortable they are in the world and how responsive they feel the world is in meeting their needs. As your child grows and individuates, you experience a delicate balance between providing for your child's nutritional needs and fostering their independence concerning their food choices.

Often, parents and children engage in power struggles concerning food. It is important to give careful consideration to power struggles over food with your young child as your child may unconsciously feel that your withholding of food is withholding of your love. Power struggles over food can be simplified with forethought and planning.

Four Healthy Food Attitudes for Your Child

ATTITUDE #1: YOUR CHILD EATS WHEN THEY ARE HUNGRY

One of the most important food goals for your child is to learn to monitor their own internal physical needs. For some children, they need to realize when they are hungry. For some children, they need to realize that when they are tired or out of energy or cranky, then they need to eat. Guide your child to tune into their body so that their food and drink needs will be responsive to their body's needs, not to external stimuli.

ATTITUDE #2: MAKE HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES

An important food goal for your child is to learn to make healthy food choices at meals and snacktimes. Having healthy food choices available at home and minimizing or eliminating unhealthy foods from your home can go a long way toward guiding your child in making healthy food choices. In addition, your making healthy food choices and talking about these choices is a strong model for your child.

ATTITUDE #3: CHILDREN ARE INVOLVED IN FOOD PREPARATION

Your child should learn to prepare food for themselves as part of their growing autonomy. Your child can also be a mealtime helper as part of [Your Family Food Team](#). With your encouragement, this can begin at an early age.

ATTITUDE #4: MEALTIME IS CONNECTION TIME

It is important for your child to experience meals as important family together time; the food at meals is for their body's nourishment and the time together at meals is for the nourishment of your family's spirit. Your child knows that, amidst a busy day, at mealtimes you will listen and share about your child's day and that they are expected to participate in talk about their family's daily happenings.

Four Healthy Food Attitudes for Your Family

ATTITUDE #1: 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 counterproductive. Food fights accomplish nothing except conflict.

With the families that I work with, I always say, “Try *NEVER* to have power struggles with your child over food. 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 concerning unhealthy food choices, but we also need to be thoughtful about our approach to food, food choices, snacks and meals. We need to be partnered with our child in helping them eat only when they are hungry and in helping them eat healthy foods. And we need to have family mealtimes as wonderful connecting times for families; at meals we need to make who is at the table more important than what is on the table.”

ATTITUDE #2: MEALTIMES ARE FAMILY SOULTIMES

Creating a harmonious mealtime is an important and challenging goal. For today's busy families, mealtimes are often the only family gathering times. In the best of all possible worlds, parents could provide a nutritious meal and also be relaxed and engaged during that meal. However, in the real world, sometimes the choice is between a semi-healthy dinner that is carry-out or delivery with a less-hassled parent or a hot nutritious meal prepared by a harried parent. Opt for the semi-healthy dinner, which comes with a side of friendly and calm parent. All parents need permission to take the broad view in terms of balancing nutritional meals and harmonious family together time. Family meals are about family connection.

ATTITUDE #3: HAVE AGE-APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS

It is very important to have realistic expectations about your young child's eating habits and mealtime behavior.

ATTITUDE #4: CREATE A FAMILY FOOD TEAM

There can be a good deal of family time and energy spent buying food, preparing meals, setting the table, and cleaning up after meals. From the earliest age, you can include your child as part of [Your Family Food Team](#) in planning and preparing snacks and meals.

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."

REFLECT ON YOUR OWN NEED TO SEPARATE AND LET GO

Food is an integral part of the parent-child bond beginning when your child is a newborn and relies totally on you for their feeding and nourishment. It is no wonder that, as your parent-child relationship evolves and your child matures and makes their own decisions, their budding independence may cause you to feel anxious and not as needed.

Lengthening the apron strings and giving your child additional autonomy around food choices requires a gradual and subtle shift in nurturing your child on a very basic level. The questions become (within the context of healthy food choices): *"Whose body is it, anyway? Who can know if their child's stomach is full or hungry? Who can determine what food tastes good to their child?"*

I now feel that my power struggles with my children over food were a reflection of my anxiety about their health and my separation anxiety in giving them more control over their choices, their lives and their bodies. My food struggles with my children had to do with the complicated role of letting go and giving my child more independence as they matured.

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 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 for a sweet soda. I remember my favorite aunt, Aunt Thelma, baking her special mandelbrodt (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, 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 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 remember as a teenager when I baby-sat for families with a candy jar, 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. 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 a bag labeled for frozen peas, 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 gray 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.

A LARGE SIDEBAR ABOUT FOOD ALLERGIES AND SENSITIVITIES

First of all, your child's physical and medical safety is of the utmost importance. If you suspect that your child has food allergies or sensitivities, it is crucial that your child have a comprehensive pediatric examination and that you have a thorough discussion with your child's pediatrician and pediatric allergist concerning any allergies.

Parents of children with allergies need to be very vigilant in reading labels and questioning food preparers concerning foods. If your child's pediatrician or pediatric allergist has prescribed an epi-pen in case of an allergy attack, an epi-pen needs to be with your child's caretakers at all times and all adults in all situations need to be trained in the use of the epi-pen. If your child has allergies and requires an epi-pen, your pediatrician or pediatric allergist can best advise you on how to work with your child concerning the epi-pen. Under the advice of your pediatrician and pediatric allergist, your child needs to be taught what foods they cannot eat; at the appropriate age they also need to practice using an epi-pen so that they can administer it to themselves if they need to.

It should also be noted that I have heard health professionals and nutritionists state it is possible for your child to have negative results in testing for a specific food allergy, but your child may still have a sensitivity to a specific food that affects your child behaviorally. This sensitivity would be empirical in terms of how they behave after they eat a given food.

When your child ingests a food to which they are allergic or sensitive, your child's immune system spends valuable resources dealing with that allergen. Your child may then have fewer resources to bring to a situation; as a result, your child may have less impulse control, less verbal ability and less focus. Your child may have a low tolerance for frustration, be quick to anger or experience attentional difficulties as a result of their allergies or sensitivities.

I have worked with children who test negative for lactose intolerance, that is, allergy to dairy products, but it is clear from observation that these children are more aggressive and have a lower tolerance for frustration when they are eating dairy. I have seen aggressive children who go gluten-free and/or dairy-free become much calmer and controlled and more attentive within several days of dietary changes. An elimination diet is the best indication of this link between a food sensitivity and your child's behavior.

When children are sensitive to foods that affect them behaviorally, they need help in realizing the effect that this food has on their resources and their control.

"Damian, I wonder how you are feeling since you had that piece of pizza? You seem to be more active to me. I think that is the effect that cheese and other dairy products have on your body."

"You seem very tired and cross, Kara. When you have things with white flour, it slows your body down. Next time, I think your body would feel better if you ate the gluten-free crackers that are in your snack drawer."

When I was a classroom teacher, I became alerted to the connection between aggressive behavior and allergies. Over time I observed that, in a typical classroom of 15 children, often four of the children (about 1 in 5, or 20%) had behaviors that were affected by allergies. Some of the effects were attentional issues or lack of energy, but some of the effects were angry or aggressive confrontations with children and adults.

A good allergy resource book is *"Is this Your Child? Discovering and Treating Unrecognized Allergies in Children and Adults,"* by Doris Rapp. This book is available in many libraries in their Resource Section. In this book, Dr. Rapp describes how to be your child's food detective by keeping a food diary of your child's foods for a period of time and noticing your child's behavior. If your child has a low tolerance for frustration or a temper tantrum or angry outburst, she suggests examining your child's diet for the previous two meals and in-between snacks. Try to find a pattern between food and your child's angry, aggressive, or non-attentive behavior. Then, as difficult as it may be, try eliminating the suspected food from your child's diet for at least a week to see if your child is calmer and more focused. This food diary would be very helpful when you consult with your pediatrician or pediatric allergist.

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.

MELLOW MEAL TIMES: GUIDELINES, PROPS, GAMES & YOUR FAMILY FOOD TEAM

Guidelines for Preserving Your Sanity

GUIDELINE #1:

NOURISH YOURSELF—ON MANY LEVELS—BEFORE YOU FEED YOUR CHILD

You set the emotional tone at mealtimes. It is important for you to feel somewhat relaxed and nourished on an emotional level before you can think about nourishing your child at meals.

On an airplane, during the emergency instructions at the beginning of the trip, the flight attendant talks about parents putting oxygen masks on themselves first and then putting the mask up to their child's face. I've always been glad for that reminder. As a mother, I think to care for my child first. The airplane lesson: only when we have nurtured ourselves first can we provide sustenance for our child.

Along those lines, sometimes I encourage parents to set their alarm clock fifteen minutes before the family usually rises so that they can have some Me Time in the morning and gather themselves before the busy-ness of the day begins. That fifteen minutes can go a long way toward a harmonious family morning and breakfast.

To minimize the conflicts of that Witching Hour from 5-6pm at home, I encourage parents to take some Me Time for ten or fifteen minutes before picking a child up from childcare or school or after leaving work and before coming home to their family.

You can stop for a latte, go to the library for quiet time, park your car a few blocks from childcare or from home, take some deep breaths and listen to music. Even a short amount of time alone can prepare you for the Witching Hour/Arsenic Hour and to family demands and food needs as you arrive home.

GUIDELINE # 2:

THE BEST DINNER CAN BE THE DINNER YOU DON'T PREPARE

Give yourself permission not to cook. It is important to remember that what is called the Arsenic Hour or Witching Hour from 5-6pm is often the most challenging family time of the day. Everyone is transitioning from their school and work and is often hungry and hassled, including you. Sometimes the best meal is the meal not prepared. I often encourage parents to plan on frozen dinners—from the grocery or their own meals—or carry-out or delivery several times a week if they can afford it, as this can reserve your remaining energy for connecting with your child rather than preparing the food.

When my children were young, my dinner goal was one home-cooked dinner a week. I designated Friday as the meal that I would do an old-fashioned cooked-from-scratch, meat-and-potatoes-and-veggie meal that I considered super healthy. I could make that happen once a week—it relieved my guilt around other meals that weren't quite as healthy or as homemade or traditional as I liked. As my children got older, this Friday meal also became the one meal per week that children couldn't skip because of playdates or afterschool activities. I loved starting each weekend with wonderful family connecting time over a nourishing homemade meal.

I often suggest that parents have a Friday ritual to start the weekend in an easy way—Friday night as Pizza and Video Night often works. You and your child can take turns choosing which video and which pizza and which dessert. Videos are great because tired parents can semi-sleep through them after a challenging week.

GUIDELINE # 3: HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR CHILD

Lack of Appetite: Children are not always hungry at meal times. It is important for your child to monitor their hunger and then follow their internal barometer telling them to eat or not eat. This is an important learning experience in listening to their body, in respecting their eating rhythm.

Food Choices: In addition, children are not always hungry for the specific food that is set on the table. Should your child be forced to eat the food that is served, especially after you or someone else has spent time, energy, and money to prepare the meal?

It helps to answer this question if we take it to the adult level. If you had brussel sprouts put on your plate and you hated the smell and taste of brussel sprouts, should you, as an adult be forced to eat brussel sprouts? Some think this forcing broadens children's eating selection—would it broaden your food repertoire? Rarely!

If your child doesn't want to eat what is on the table, then they can be given the option of preparing something from their personal Snack Drawer or Refrigerator Food Shelf; a younger child may need some help if this is their choice. *"I see that you aren't interested in the prepared food—would you like to fix yourself something from your Snack Drawer?"* This approach encourages a child's autonomy in helping them get in touch with their food needs, make appropriate food choices, and take responsibility for the consequence of not eating what is on the table. This approach also fosters cooperation between family members rather than power struggles over food.

Serving Size: I have heard doctors say that a person's stomach is the size of their fist. For your child, that fist and the size of their stomach are relatively small compared to an adult's fist and stomach. Most pediatricians say that a serving of food is relative to a child's age, that is, one serving for a child translates to one tablespoon for every year. Using this suggested rule-of-thumb, a serving of applesauce for a one-year-old would be

one tablespoon, for a two-year-old would be two tablespoons, etc. It is important to have age-appropriate portions in mind when thinking about your child's food needs and wants. This can avoid power struggles over how much your child eats.

Sitting at the Table: It is also very important to have age-appropriate expectations in terms of focus and activity level at meals. Most two-, three- and four-year-olds have difficulty sitting for longer than several minutes at the table with only food for interest. In addition, no matter what their interest in food, your child—especially your son—may have difficulty sitting for any length of time at meals.

My son was a very active boy. He was always moving his body—he needed to move to learn and to be able to listen. It was fine for me if he stood by the table at mealtimes and ran a matchbox car across his placemat while he ate; sometimes he even ran around the kitchen for a circle or two and then came back to the table. Food didn't hold a lot of interest for him when he was young, but the conversation did—he was engaged in listening and talking and it was wonderful family time. When he became older, at about eight years old, I made a deal with him that he could stand at the dinner table or sit on the kitchen window ledge next to the kitchen table during dinner if he would sit down to eat when we ate at restaurants or at the houses of family or friends. He loved that deal and was always able to sit down to meals when and where it was more socially appropriate.

It is realistic to think that your young child will probably be able to sit down through a meal by the time they are five or six, but this depends often on your child's activity level, the length of the meal, and their level of hunger and tiredness.

Table Manners: Some parents are concerned about teaching table manners from a young age. Family communication and harmony at meals is more important than teaching table manners to young children. Some manners are absorbed from gentle reminders here and there, but most table manners are learned from your modeling the desired behaviors and respect. This modeling is more powerful in a mealtime atmosphere of harmony rather than contention. Focusing on providing positive reinforcement for appropriate eating behavior is far more effective than reminders about inappropriate manners. *"I like the way you keep your mouth closed when you chew"* changes behavior better than *"Keep your elbows off the table."*

Once again, mealtimes are family soultimes. Who is at the table, sharing and listening, is more important than what food is served on the table.

Props

Structuring a family meal time can make things go more smoothly. You can use props to structure conversation or to change up the usual eating scene and engage your child's interest, especially since food is not always intrinsically interesting to young children.

PROPS FOR STRUCTURING CONVERSATION

Pass around an object to each family member in turn to structure taking turns talking. This can be a Talking Stone or Talking Stick as used in Native American circles, an hourglass sand-timer, or one of those magic wands filled with oil and floating objects. *"If you hold the Talking Stone, it is a Talking Time. For everyone else, it is a Listening Time."*

PROPS FOR TABLE-SITTING

Have some quiet activities and toys available to your child so they can still be present and participate in discussions even when they are not hungry or are finished eating. Paper and markers, dolls to feed, small animals, coloring books, playdough, mazes, puzzles, etc., can help keep your child's hands occupied while they focus on the conversation.

PROPS FOR CHANGING THE MEALTIME SCENE

When trying to change up family mealtimes to provide some additional interest and conversation, try appealing to your child's senses and your child's imagination.

- Eat by flashlight:** A family-friendly variation on dinner by candlelight. The dimmer light can calm your young child and make your entire dinnertime more peaceful.
- Eat with delicious smells:** Our appetites are very linked to our sense of smell. About fifteen minutes prior to eating, try lighting a candle in a safe place far away from your table, a candle that smells like one of your child's favorite foods. Candles are now available in so many different aromas—try cinnamon, orange, apple, ginger or peppermint—that may help stimulate food interest and provide a guessing game *"What's that Smell?"* at dinner.
- Eat with music and songs:** Research has shown that people often eat to the speed of the background music that they are hearing. Play different types of music for different mealtime effects. Play sing-along songs for some family sing-and-eat time.
- Have a color-coordinated meal:** Have your child help you plan an all-white meal, an all-brown-meal, a rainbow-colored meal or a patriotic red-white-and-blue meal.
- Have an indoor picnic:** Put a plastic tablecloth on the floor and eat there—at least now your baby can't throw things down on the floor! Read *The Winter Picnic* by Robert Welber during dinner.

Games

MOST FAVORITE LEAST FAVORITE GAME

Have everyone take turns talking about the most favorite part of their day and the least favorite part of their day. Keep it short, keep it simple. Follow-up on the previous day's most and least favorite parts when possible.

I SPY

Play the *I Spy* guessing game on specific categories that are present at the meal—foods that are on the table, colors of clothes that are being worn, objects in the room, etc.

OTHER GAMES

The following games can be adapted for table conversation for your child at almost any age: *Grandmother's Attic*, *Mother May I?*, *Twenty Questions*, rhyming games, hide-and-seek in the dining area, and *Where's Waldo?*-type books.

Your Family Food Team

The groundwork of building a Family Food Team can occur with all sharing the kitchen space, with your very young child playing on the floor, and then evolve slowly over time to include your child's help with meal preparation. Your young child can enjoy playing with pots and pans; you can gradually over time add something to their pots and pans that they can stir and slowly, over time, become a Family Food Team helper.

Much family time is spent around meals, preparing food and the table and then cleaning up afterwards. There are many mealtime opportunities that can help strengthen Your Family Food Team. As is age-appropriate, your child can be a food helper in many stages of food planning, preparing, eating, and clean-up. These can be assigned chores or daily tasks as they arise. Structuring these jobs can be fun and can help engage your child's cooperation as part of Your Family Food Team.

Sometimes mealtime helping can be facilitated with a song: a preparing-for-dinner song or a tearing-up-lettuce-for-salad song or a clean-up song, the sillier the better. Food songs are especially fun if you change-up the words from familiar food songs. *Have You Seen the Muffin Man* can become *Have You Seen the Pickle Man?* *I Love to Eat Apples and Bananas* can become *I Love to Eat Mudpies and Bananas*.

FOOD PLANNING

If you are the type of parent that has a weekly food plan from which you make a food list, then try to include your child briefly in the planning. For your young child, you might have a list of food staples with pictures that your child can point to and then you can add this to the list. Or you might want to show your child the colorful supermarket inserts from the newspaper and let them point or choose some of the foods to put on your list. If you are the type of parent that has a list on the front of the fridge of what's inside, you might want to include pictures with that list. You might want to create a special Food List For Sarah that you and your child add to as she requests food items.

GROCERY SHOPPING

Most children are not interested in the grocery store experience and find food shopping to be an overwhelming sensory experience. Most children would rather not sit strapped into a cart looking at food that they can't touch or smell or eat.

In terms of taking your child grocery shopping, I am sure that you are well aware that some of the most horrific parenting anecdotes ever imagined take place in the grocery store—there's the double whammy of so much visual food stimulation, often of candy and ice cream and other sugar treats, and the element of shame and embarrassment of having a screaming, tantruming child in public.

When my children were two years old, I could usually get away with supplying them with one lollipop to make it through a grocery shop. When my children were three to five years of age, I tried never to take them to the grocery store; it was worth it to me to hire a babysitter or to go alone at 5am or 10pm just to avoid the grocery-shop-with-kid experience. There is plenty of time after age five, or later, for grocery shopping to be an educational food experience for your child.

FOOD PREP

For most families, meals during the week are hectic and there is the famous pre-dinner Witching Hour when everyone seems to fall apart and have few resources for preparing dinner. This section on food prep is for those weekday dinners and weekend meals when you realistically have the resources to make meals a family Together Time opportunity.

You can engage your child in food preparation more easily if you engage your child on a sensory level. Certainly you can discuss the sensory aspects of the food you are preparing, but in addition your child will be engaged if you appeal to their tactile sense—most young children love playing with water. You can provide a small tub of water, or put a step stool or chair at the kitchen sink for an older child, and have your child help in the food prep or clean-up. Your child can wash carrots by hand or, even more fun, with a vegetable scrubber. You can also add some soap to the sink or tub water and have your child wash some of your food prep items—pots and pans and spoons—as you no longer need them.

Your child can also help with food choices—should we cut the carrots into sticks or circles? Should we eat the carrots raw or cook them? Should we have apples or applesauce?

The goal is to involve your child in the food preparation process in whatever way works so that there can be communication and togetherness even before the sit-down meal begins.

I have read many articles about how having your child help prepare food can encourage them to eat those foods. Realistically, both personally and professionally, I don't believe that having a child help has any immediate impact on them trying the foods they prepare. But I do think that the time spent preparing food together can be wonderful bonding time between you and your child, no matter the eating outcome. It is important to have the goal of sharing the preparation experience, rather than your child trying a new food, as you have no control over that. Don't set yourself up for unrealistic expectations and frustration.

Your child can...

- Wash pots & pans in soapy water at the sink or in a floor-level tub with 1" of water
- Mix and stir food with spoons or hands
- Taste food for seasoning—add the seasoning
- Use a salad spinner
- Add ingredients for smoothies; do the buttons on the blender
- Squeeze a garlic press
- Turn on the blender/food processor buttons with supervision

TABLE PREP

Your child can...

- Spritz the table with water; wipe the table with a sponge
- Make paper place mats and decorate them with markers
- Put out placemats
- Match utensils to place mats (you trace plates and spoons and forks onto a paper placemat and setting the table becomes a matching exercise)
- Make place cards for where people sit, either drawing or printing
- Set out table activities for themselves—matchbox cars, paper and crayons, etc.
- plan the music to play during dinner

FOOD CLEAN-UP

Having a clean-up song, perhaps borrowed from your child's daycare or school, can provide the impetus to have the energy for meal clean-up be a family effort. Having a big trash can nearby ("*Two points for throwing the napkins in the trashcan!*") and some soapy water in the sink for dirty dishes can make clean-up a quick chore.

After meals When my children were growing up it seemed that everyone left the kitchen and I would be the Lone Ranger doing clean-up. After much frustration, I finally made a dinner rule: "*No one leaves the kitchen until everyone leaves the kitchen.*" That way I wasn't left alone with kitchen duty. This meant that everyone would scurry around helping as quickly as possible so that they could get on to their next activity. This rule made me the Wicked Witch of the West, but at least it made me a WW of the W who wasn't so frustrated!

Your child can...

- Throw out their own napkin
- Put their own dish and glass in the sink
- Spoon leftover food into a container
- Wash dishes in soapy tub of water or sink
- Wipe the table with a sponge
- Sweep the floor with a broom; hold the dustpan
- Use a dustbuster on the chairs and floor

FAQ

PICKY EATERS OR SELECTIVE EATERS?

Q: My child is an extremely picky eater. He only eats two or three foods and it drives me crazy! I've tried everything to get him to try new foods, but nothing works. Help!

It is important to have a broad perspective on your child's food choices. For parents of selective eaters, a phrase which puts a positive spin on picky eaters, there is sometimes anxiety that a child will never expand their food choices. Do not give up hope of your child becoming a food adventurer. As long as your pediatrician says that your child is healthy, you need to believe that your child's food choices will expand as your child grows and develops. For many children, at about seven or eight years of age there can be an expansion of food choices as the neurological leap that occurs at that age broadens your child's world in general and may help your child become more of a risk-taker when it comes to food.

Sometimes it helps to characterize your Child the Picky Eater as Your Child the Selective Eater. If your child has a limited eating repertoire, that can be challenging, but it can also make meal preparation easier.

In their book *Nature's Thumbprint*, authors Peter Neubauer and Alexander Neubauer discuss a study of twins who were separated at birth and adopted by different families; research was conducted every year on these twins to help determine which characteristics of the children seemed to be inherited and which characteristics seemed to be environmental. There is an anecdote from the book which illustrates twin traits and inherited characteristics, but, for me, it shows the importance of food perspectives of parents.

In one case studied there were twin boys who were separated at birth and one boy was adopted by a family on the East Coast and one boy was adopted by a family on the West Coast. As part of the research, the parents were interviewed when the boys were three years old. When asked about her son's eating habits, the mother of the boy on the East Coast said, "My son is a terrible eater. He only eats food if I sprinkle it with cinnamon." When they interviewed the mother of the twin on the West Coast about her son's eating habits, she said, "My son is a wonderful eater. All I have to do is sprinkle cinnamon on his food and he'll eat anything." Picky eating/selective eating is in the eyes of the beholder!

From personal experience, both of my children were extraordinarily selective eaters when they were young. My son ate only five different things when he was five and prided himself on that fact. He became a food-adventurer when he was seven and he became more of a risk-taker in other areas of his life. As an adult he eats a large variety of foods, including many ethnic foods I have never tried.

My daughter survived solely on bananas, scrambled eggs and vitamins when she was two years old. She fell in love with fast-food roast beef when she was seven and then, at age eight, became a vegetarian for two years. As an adult she was a vegetarian for many years, then a vegan, and is now a raw foodie, with chicken and fish added in, and she eats a far more adventurous diet than her mama.

When my daughter was a teenager, I had this experience one day as I hugged her goodbye before school. She was taller, bigger and—with the help of the Stairmaster and free weights—stronger than I would ever be. She was now the big girl and, lo and behold, I was now the little girl.

Later that day, in an early childhood parenting workshop I was presenting, the inevitable question arose around meal times and conflicts about food. I related how my daughter had had a very limited diet as a toddler and how we had had major power struggles over food and meals. I shared about that morning hug and how sturdy and healthy my daughter had become. If only, when she was younger, I had known about this morning's hug. If only, when she was younger, I had had a mental picture of her as she was today, so big and so

strong. I wish that I had had the faith in both myself and in her to know that she would grow up strong and healthy, making good food choices and enjoying family meals.

In addition, if your child is having a particularly difficult time expanding their food repertoire, it may be helpful to examine their diet through a sensory perspective. Does your child prefer salty and crunchy foods, which are alerting, or creamy foods, which are calming? Does your child prefer warm foods, room-temperature foods or cool foods? Does your child prefer bland foods or spicy foods? Are certain foods more self-soothing than others for your child? If your child is not a risk-taker with foods, exploring possible sensory sensitivities may be helpful.

If you should have continued concerns about your child's eating, in addition to consulting your pediatrician, you should consult a nutritionist.

SNACKS AND JUICE, BUT NO MEALS

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.

FOOD AS REWARD? WITHDRAWING FOOD AS PUNISHMENT?

Q. Sometimes I bribe my child to do something by offering a lollipop if she will cooperate. Sometimes I threaten my child by telling her that she can't have dessert after dinner if she doesn't cooperate. I'm not comfortable with either of these set-ups, but they work. Is this "bad parenting?"

Because food is love for young children, it is important that parents be very careful about using food as a reward and in using withdrawal of food as a punishment. Parental love for a child should not be negotiable or part of a bargain based on behavior. We always love our child, which is different from our not always liking their behavior. When parents use food as a bargaining chip, it sends out a message that nurturance and parental love are to be earned or disavowed, which can be an anxiety-producing message for a child.

If you use food as a reward, it should be with moderation and only on occasion.

In the best of all possible worlds, I would not use food as a reward. But this is the real world. Full disclosure: when my children were young, I sometimes bribed them with lollipops. Sometimes you just gotta do what works. No long-term harm done, at least that's what I told myself.

When my children were young, we had a ritual where, after a doctor's appointment I would take them to the nearby 7-11 Store for a food treat of their choice. It helped to focus on something beyond the doctor's appointment and to help add some sweetness to an unpleasant experience.

Withdrawing or withholding food should never be used as a punishment, especially for young children who cannot provide food and nourishment for themselves. (This does not refer to appropriate limit-setting concerning less healthy food choices.) If your child is acting inappropriately at mealtime, taking food away is not recommended; the behavior should be dealt with directly without introducing food issues. If your child is misbehaving concerning food, such as throwing food or spitting food, then certainly you can say, *"Food is for eating. We'll take a short food break until you feel like eating"* and remove the food for about five minutes; after five minutes, providing positive encouragement for appropriate eating can help shape more appropriate food behavior: *"I like the way you are eating your food."*

NOT HUNGRY AT DINNER, THEN HUNGRY AT BEDTIME

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.

EATING AT GRANDMA'S

Q. When my child visits her grandma, she eats candy and has soda. I'm not comfortable with this, but her grandma doesn't abide by my healthy food guidelines. Isn't this confusing to my child since I am trying to teach him about healthy food choices?

It can be complicated when you are working hard to help your child make healthy food choices and then a visit to Grandma is filled with candy bars or homemade cookies. Sometimes talking with Grandma can help her get on board [Your Family Food Team](#), sometimes not. Grandparents instinctively know that food is love and often want to give lots of sweet love through special food treats.

I know one family where the children call their grandmother The Sugar Queen. They love going to her house and eating all the chocolate candy that they can't have at home. It is an important part of their bonding experience with Grandma.

Taking a broader perspective, if your child is not eating forbidden fruit at Grandma's more than once a week, then this indulgence seems moderate in a lifelong perspective. Just as the connection between you and your child and food is important, to most grandparents this love connection with food and their grandchild is important. Your child can be receiving your daily messages about good food and internalizing them and also having occasional Grandma treats.

It would also be helpful for you to discuss with your child your healthy food perspective and Grandma's different perspective. Certainly this same issue may arise on playdates and at other times, so it is important to provide some guidance concerning these differing messages in different settings. If you realize that you and your behavior and your home food environment is the most powerful influence on your child's eating habits, then you may be able to relax and have more flexibility around special circumstances that are not totally in sync with your specific food guidelines.

YOUR OWN FOOD HISTORY

Q. My family food history is so complicated—overweight mother, father who rarely sat down to meals, siblings all fighting at meals, emphasis on food at every birthday and holiday, lots of junk food and sugar available. It is hard for me to get myself and my family onto a good nutritional track—lots of food baggage. Help!

Every parent comes with their own food and mealtime expectations and habits from their own growing-up years. It can be helpful to reflect upon these childhood experiences, as we all carry these attitudes into our present relationships with food and into our present food relationships with our child. The following questions can be helpful in focusing on your own early experiences with food:

What was the role of food in your family? Did your family live to eat or eat to live? Was food talked about? Was there enough food? Was there healthy food, lots of snacks? Was nutrition discussed in your family?

What was the relationship between you and your mother regarding food?

Was weight—being underweight or overweight—an issue in your family?

Did your family members eat when they were hungry? Bored? Sad? Happy? Tired? Frustrated?

Who prepared the meals? Did you have food choices or were food choices dictated to you? Was preparing food a shared experience? Did you have meals as a family? What was the emotional atmosphere at meals? Was there talking during meals or silence or conflict? What were mealtime topics of conversation?

Was food a part of family celebrations? Were there food rituals? Are there favorite family recipes?

As an example, I will share some of my own childhood food experiences. When I was little my mother was depressed and slept late every morning, so my older brother and I made our own breakfasts before school each morning. We enjoyed having cereal and milk and playing memory-guessing games with the cereal boxes.

At dinner, my three siblings and I fought so much that my father refused to eat with us, so my parents ate their dinner later in the evening after we kids had finished eating (and fighting). There were very few family meals, except at holiday times. There was very little communication between me and my parents in general and this lack of connection was reflected in meals.

As a result, one of my wishes for my own children was lots of communication and family meals with lots of sharing. I always pictured lively discussions at the dinner table and the Normal Rockwell Thanksgiving. When my children were growing up, I made this a reality

one day a week by designating Friday night dinners as Family Dinner time: everyone was expected to be present and participate fully. This became a wonderful reality that the whole family anticipated for the week; we spent fun Friday Family Dinners for years—it was special together time to end the week and kick off the weekends (which were sometimes busy and scattered).

When I was growing up we had a birthday ritual which, upon reflection now, seems strange. For our birthdays we were allowed to choose one food and we could eat as much of it as we wanted. I can remember on my ten-year birthday eating almost a pound of steak. As an eleven-year-old I ate $\frac{3}{4}$ quart of chocolate ice cream on my birthday. I can remember feeling so uncomfortable that I thought my stomach would burst. It now seems so interesting that gluttony was encouraged in my family as part of our birthday celebration.

In some ways it is understandable, as my mother grew up very poor in a family of five children, so I can imagine that there was not always enough to eat and that this birthday ritual was a result of her own childhood deprivation around food. Although I am usually very mindful about what I eat, on my birthday I still like to pig out on whatever and however much I want to eat. It was only when writing this article that I made the connection of my current birthday eating habits to my childhood birthday celebrations.

The role of food in my life has been complicated. At times, I have used food to fill up some empty places in my life, as well as to hide from feelings in my life. I joined a formal weight loss program when I was in my twenties and that provided a structured template for healthy eating for me. In addition, my self-esteem has blossomed as I have gotten older, so I feel like I deserve to eat and enjoy healthy food and that food is more for my pleasure and for keeping me healthy than for filling up the emotional gaps in my life. I have found the books by Geneen Roth concerning food and emotional issues very helpful. She examines the food and love connection for adults.

Reflecting on your own past family history can help you understand your current attitudes and expectations concerning healthy food choices and mealtime expectations. Examining your food history can help you be conscious of which aspects of your relationship with food and family meals you want to continue and which attitudes and expectations you wish to change. This self-exploration can help you in being more deeply aware of your relationship to food and to consciously set guidelines and goals for creating healthy attitudes and harmonious meals with your young child.

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 the emotional and social role of food in your child's life and in your family and provided information on how to partner with your child regarding healthy food attitudes. The importance of family mealtimes as family soultimes was discussed. Words, strategies, and skills were offered to avoid food conflicts before they arise, to help children have age-appropriate healthy attitudes toward food, to build Your Family Food Team and to foster family communication during meals.

May this article help your family have healthy food attitudes and harmonious meals.

iBlankie also offers [Food Strategies](#), a 13-page article on tips in relating with your child on food issues, and [Mellow Mealtimes](#), a 13-page article offering strategies for more peaceful meals. The information contained in those two articles is included in expanded form in this article.

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