

Parent Discussion: Food and Nutrition, “YUCK, What is it?”

Developing a broad food palette, healthy eating habits, and meal-time manners.

Introducing children to new foods is not always quick and easy. I came up with the title of this session from my experience with my own children, between the ages of 4 and 10 or so. Upon being served something they did not recognize, they would say “yuck, I don’t like that! What is it?”! There are always questions and concerns from parents about their child’s eating habits or frustrating behaviors. We hear things like “My child won’t sit at the table to eat.”, or “My child will only drink chocolate milk.” And it is always surprising how many parents greet their children at the end of each day with “did you eat your whole lunch?”

Food is important and powerful. It has many cultural and family ties, with both positive and negative impacts.

Food, Nutrition, and Brain Development:

- Nutrition has a big impact on healthy brain development, as well as on possible food allergies and behavioral development as well, so be mindful of the types of foods you are feeding your child by focusing on healthy oils (very important for the brain), whole grains, protein, fruits, and vegetables while avoiding added sugars, processed foods, heavy reliance on gluten, and sodium.
- Early nutrition sets the stage for healthy brain outcomes in adolescence and adulthood with many links being made to the effects of nutrition on learning, memory, social/emotional well-being, and more. **Remember it’s not about the quantity of food your child eats, it’s about the QUALITY.**
- Try serving new food in the same meal with food they like and eat. It may take a child up to 8 to 12 tries to accept a new food. Remember, they are likely to end up liking things you like.
- Avoid offering pouches or baby food that is pureed with added fruits. **Work to develop tastes for individual flavors without sweetening it up with fruits.** This will allow your child to develop a varied palette from a young age, making them less picky eaters and less reliant on sweet flavors. Think about building your child’s palette for both taste and texture.
- When your child resists eating a certain food, ask them to have a “No thank you” bite before moving onto other foods. They can say no thank you after trying the food. Sometimes they actually find they do like it. I can take 10 or more introductions for a child to accept a new food!
- Resist the temptation to give the child anything – just so they eat. We all love crackers! But they generally do not provide much nutritional value. At each meal and snack offer fruits, vegetables, proteins, and limited bread or crackers. Especially in providing lunch for school, be sure that you will be happy if they only choose to eat one item in their lunch. If you find that they are not eating their protein or veggies, reduce the amount of fruit and grain options. Try to avoid highly sweetened “bars”.
- Include your child in meal planning and preparation. They are often more likely to eat a salad that they helped prepare, or to eat a lunch when they were able to choose which protein, fruit and vegetable was included. This can also offer an opportunity to teach them about nutrition and meal planning.
 - When my children were around 10-17, we started having one of them plan and help prepare a dinner each week. They learned about planning a balanced nutritional meal, and reading and following recipes. When they experienced the effort and thought that goes into preparing a meal, and how it hurts your feelings when you have done all that work and someone says “yuck, what is it?” they became much more respectful at dinner time. They learned to say “thank you for dinner. This was not my favorite recipe.” And sometimes they loved what was made. Once my son chose to make potato leek soup. Everyone sat down, had a spoonful, and pretty much everyone wanted a bigger spoon and a second helping! (Fun note, that same son is the one who was my pickiest eater and does not like potatoes, so it was a big surprise that he chose that recipe and liked it!)

Help! My Child Throws Their Food!! How to handle it when your child is throwing food on the ground: be mindful of your “reaction”, is it creating a fun game for your child or getting them your attention?

Why do they do it?

- Infants are just learning about cause and effect.
- They are finding ways to communicate with caregivers. They may be saying they are full or they don't prefer that food.
- They may also throw because there is too much food on their plate. Consider serving small portions to your child and then giving more after they have eaten the initial portion. This will mean less food to play with and throw.
- They may be seeking attention or enjoying the cause and effect.

How to respond:

- Avoid a big reaction and leave the food on the floor until your child loses interest. You can then pick the food up, throw it away and provide fresh food, as necessary, with the reminder “food stays on your plate”.
- Give your child your focus during meals and use the opportunity to eat meals together and model proper behavior. Giving them your attention when they are doing what they are supposed to during mealtimes enforces proper behavior.
- Investing in a highchair that comes right up to the kitchen table (some ideas are outlined below), a weaning table or a chair that attaches to your table, makes it harder for your child to throw to the floor.
- Praise non-food throwing behaviors! Be specific, “You are keeping the food on your plate so nicely.” “You have eaten three bites of beans!”
- Let it go! The less you worry about mess, food waste, and food throwing, the less reactive you will become and the less your child will feel the need to get your attention or a reaction in this way.
- Follow your child's “all done” cues and give them sign language and words for when they feel done. This will help them better communicate, lessening the need for throwing food as communication. Respect that they are able to communicate their food needs.
- Hold a boundary – tell your child if you throw the food on the ground you are telling me you are all done (use sign for all done) and we will put the food away. Then do so when they throw the food, calmly! =) “You are showing me you are all done (use the sign language for all done). You can say all done (and help them make the sign with their hands).” And simply remove the plate of food and clean up. Wait until at least close to the next normal meal/snack time before offering food again, even if there is a fit.

Setting Mealtime Boundaries:

- Your child should eat what the family is eating, do not make an alternative meal for your child. Certainly you might consider ensuring that there is at least one option on the menu you think your child will eat. =)
- Require that your child sits at the table during meals and that they stay at the table until excused. For the younger ones, you can teach the signs for all done, and down please, or just please, to teach them to ask to be excused. At first respond as quickly as possible to allowing them to leave the table, to reinforce the appropriate way to ask. Later you can start to extend the time that you ask them to stay at the table, waiting on others to finish. Do not allow wandering or eating while walking around the house. This is not only a safety issue, but it sets a clear expectation about behavior, which will be expected when at a grandparent's home, restaurants, school, etc. You can simply remind them, “If you are hungry you need to sit.” And if they continue to get up, tell

them “You are showing me you are all done eating when you get up. If you get up again, we will put the food away.”

- Offer the food to your child and if they do not eat it, or throw a fit, calmly let them know that they can get up from the table. Do not give them an alternative option, when they are hungry and ready to try again, offer them their original meal.
- Set a boundary on how many times you will be offering their original meal back to them – one time after the original attempt. If your child does not follow your boundaries on the second attempt, let them know that dinner (or whatever meal it is) is over and that they will have another chance to eat in the morning for breakfast. The reason for this boundary is that often a child is trying to get you to give them a more preferred food option, like crackers or cereal! Instead of their healthy dinner. If they are really not hungry, then there is no problem with them not eating that meal. But if they are hungry, and just hoping for a different food option to be offered, then they will eat from what is offered if no alternatives are available. (Again, this was a pattern my pickiest eater developed. I had started to offer him other options after dinner time and it backfired. It took a couple of weeks of setting aside his dinner plate and re-offering it before he understood that I was no longer going to offer alternatives. I did insure there was always something that he liked in the dinner offering.)
- Children can learn to wait with quiet hands for a meal to be served instead of banging their plate, cup or utensils. Parents are often amazed to see 7 or 8 infants waiting quietly for their food at the table. It really does not take long to teach this. Ask them to show you quiet hands if they would like their food. Start by helping them put their two hands on the table, then immediately put down their plate. Soon you will be able to say “show me quiet hands” and they will be able to place their hands themselves. Again, try to respond quickly to the appropriate waiting behavior. In time they will be able to extend the time that they are waiting quietly. Do not respond to the banging behavior that you do not want, by giving them their food. That is “feeding” the opposite behavior than you are wanting!

Setting the environment for success:

- Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers can sit at the “adult table” with some accommodations. Use a secure infant chair that can sit right up to the table during meals. There are some great options that are not highchairs that create more independence and inclusion.
 1. A weaning table is great for meals that are not done as a family. A weaning table is essentially a small table, low to the ground, with an appropriate small chair (usually with sides) for an infant. Once an infant can mostly sit on their own, they are ready for a table and chair that’s just their size. (Pictures on right)
 2. Many Montessori families adore the Tripp Trapp Chair from Stokke – this chair grows with your child allowing independence and inclusion from birth. Find it here: <https://www.stokke.com/USA/en-us/category/high-chairs/tripp-trapp>. Less expensive mimics are available with little searching. Another great option is a chair that attaches to your family table like this one...
- Use real utensils, cups, and dishes, when possible. Appetizer forks and spoons are perfect sized for the small hand and ramekins and small ceramic dishes are sturdy enough and easy to replace. You can find a set of small utensils through Amazon by searching for appetizer forks and spoons. World Market also usually has them in store.
 1. Avoid using suction plates as these often become a game and they don’t teach the child how to treat things with care.



2. Create a space for your child's eating materials in a place that they can access; a low drawer or cabinet works great! They love to be able to get their own dishes!
 3. Introduce an open cup that can be grasped by the infant's whole hand. There are many silicone options available as well as some sturdy glass ones from IKEA. Search for "infant weaning cup" on Amazon or find them at IKEA here: <https://www.ikea.com/us/en/p/pokal-snaps-glass-clear-glass-90091996/> For more information on weaning to a cup, read this: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/feeding-nutrition/Pages/Discontinuing-the-Bottle.aspx>
- Provide opportunities for independence! Create a place that your child can access where you can put snack food options for the day. Allow them to choose when they are ready to eat their snack and which of the snack items they would like to eat. Remember to keep portions small, encouraging variety and not filling up on crackers or dried fruit bars. In the Montessori philosophy, we provide boundaries through a prepared environment. Then within that prepared environment we provide as much freedom and independence as possible.

"Clean Plate Mentality": Why You Shouldn't Make Your Child Clean Their Plate:

- **First off, get curious about why you feel the need to have your child finish their plate. To change your approach, you need to understand your current state of mind. You may fit into one of these situations:**
 1. **You have family, culture, or childhood influences.** Your parents, like theirs before them, didn't want to waste food and insisted that YOU clean your plate at every meal. Or maybe you had food insecurity and didn't know when your next meal would come, or how much would be left for you.
 2. **You have your own food challenges.** Perhaps you had disordered eating patterns, and family members would often monitor and comment on your choices and portions.
 3. **You're concerned about your child's nutrition.** Not surprising, given the profuse articles and medical advice that make you doubt if your child gets enough Vitamin K and iron. Are they eating enough (any) leafy greens? Protein? Is it organic? Which milk is the best? It all makes you anxious.
 4. **You're using it as a path to a reward.** There's a longstanding rule that children need to finish their dinners before getting dessert. And you've never questioned it. After all, how will you know whether they're entitled to sweets?
 5. **Other reasons??**
- **Asking your child to finish the food on their plate can create issues for your child. Remember that hunger is a biological response. Forcing food can...**
 1. Rob them of the skill of intuitive eating- intuitive eating results in an increased awareness of hunger and fullness cues and creates a healthy relationship with eating and food – reducing shame and guilt about what we consume.
 2. Create unhealthy views surrounding bodily autonomy and trust. They have told you they are not hungry, and you continue to push them to eat more; this shows them that you do not trust them and that they cannot trust themselves to make decisions about their body. Trust that when they are hungry, they will eat. Just make sure they are offered healthy options.
 3. Cause a child to overeat due to trying please you.

How to ditch the clean plate mentality:

- Stop worrying about nutrition. Provide a healthy variety of choices and they will generally naturally balance their diet. (This could be interrupted by sensory sensitivities or developmental differences, so do pay attention to what they choose.)
- Let go of guilt about waste and find alternatives: composting leftover food or saving it in reusable containers for the next meal, are great alternatives to throwing food away.
- Look up the required serving sizes for the age of your child and make some samples for yourself, using measuring utensils and scales. You will probably be surprised how small those required servings actually are!

- Be kind to yourself. Think about the issues that make you anxious about clean plates or serving sizes. Talk to a friend or therapist; food issues that stem from childhood or our parents' beliefs can take years to undo and transform.
- Try to create a mantra that embraces the food philosophy you aspire to, even if you're still working on it. For example, "in our house we eat until we're full" or "my body, my choice." Repeat it and hang it in the kitchen.
- Pick a different time for dessert or erase dessert as an after-dinner course. The simple reality is that dessert doesn't have to follow dinner and it doesn't have to be predicated on a clean plate. It is important to stop using sweets as a reward for eating all their food. If you want to include sweets, offer them at a different time instead (but not at school!!), or allow it even if the child did not eat "all" their dinner, but maybe had at least one bite of each section of their nutritional plate, reducing its power and position in our mentality.
- Provide independence around snack time, as noted previously. Allowing a child to respond to their own body's clues about when to eat and how much to eat, helps maintain that ability into adulthood.
- Do not make asking your child what they ate at lunch time your first focus upon picking them up from school. Ask what activities they enjoyed doing today. Did they have a lesson on something new? Talk about the theme of the week. Ask who they enjoyed playing with today and what game they played. Ask if they did any work they were proud of. Ask if they were a kind and respectful community member. You will be able to see whether they ate their whole lunch when you clean out their lunch box. We try to send home most uneaten food so you can see what they did and did not eat. If there is uneaten food, you could ask them specific questions, like "Do you like chicken sandwiches?" or "would you like a different type of sandwich tomorrow?" And you can take note. Maybe they ate all their goldfish but only a few bites of their protein. So the next day you can reduce or remove the goldfish and see what happens. Or you might remind yourself about food serving sizes for your child's age, and reduce the amount of food offered. If your child's weight and growth are healthy, then there is no need to worry about how much they eat at lunch time. :-)

Below you will find two informative articles about the impacts of the clean plate mentality on children:

- <https://www.beingtheparent.com/negative-effects-of-forcing-your-kids-to-eat-1-3-years/>
- <https://www.newsweek.com/why-parents-shouldnt-force-food-picky-children-according-new-study-1044934>

Some essentials to remember:

- Don't be scared of a mess. It is normal for your child to make a mess. Model cleanup and proper use of materials and eating, without shame or criticism about the process. Ex: "I notice some food has gotten on the table; I am going to put it back on your plate where it belongs." "We use a spoon to eat rice, let me show you how.", "Some food dropped on the floor. Let's get a broom to clean that up."
- Approach mealtime with positivity and encouragement while also setting clear boundaries and following through calmly and consistently.
- Talk to your child about healthy, or "all the time" foods verses "sometimes" foods, things that are OK to eat on occasion but don't support healthy growth. Include your child in choosing (from a limited number of options) which foods they want in their lunch, or what to have for breakfast or dinner.
- Do not fill in for skimpy eating at meals with filler snack items. Re-offer the original, uneaten meal, or wait until the next normal meal time and offer healthy options.

Additional Resources and Readings:

The Role of Nutrition in Brain Development: The Golden Opportunity of the "First 1000 Days"

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4981537/>

CDC: Infant and Toddler Nutrition

<https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/InfantandToddlerNutrition/index.html>