

NUTRITIOUS FOOD

When you live with young children, a lot of the major parenting decisions tend to follow the path of least resistance. Maybe we are secretly afraid that we will be voted out of office if we make too many unpopular decisions. Maybe it is just because we are so dang tired. Or maybe it is because we are reluctant to allow our kids to experience disappointment. Nowhere is this trend more apparent than at the dinner table. One day we are in charge, but the next day the little guys and gals are calling the shots, and we have no idea how it happened!

I do not know of any parents who start off thinking that they are going to allow their kids to eat whatever they want. It just sort of happens! All it takes is one moment of weakness, when you worry that your child will literally starve if you don't give him something, anything, that he will eat. You make the idle threat ("You have to finish it, or no dessert! OK, how about five more bites? Well, how about three more bites?"), then out comes the ice cream, and the next thing you know, your darling little angel quickly realizes that all he has to do to wind up in dessert paradise is refuse to eat what he has been served.

We all know what we would like to see our kids eat – fresh produce, whole grains, and less fast food – but parents often lament to me that they simply cannot make it happen. I know how hard the struggle is; I have fought the battle myself! But, the bottom line is that children will eat what they are used to, and a lot of kids are simply the victims of having too many options. Hunger can be quite a motivator. Children in parts of the world that don't have fast food will eat what they are served. When I was a kid, we ate what we were served. My parents and grandparents ate what they were served. You get the picture. Not only that, but kids eat what their parents buy, and the primary factor that keeps us buying more and more of the "wrong" stuff is the fear of their disappointment.

None of us wants to disappoint our children. It feels wrong! But, I worry that the inability to play hard ball at the dinner table is simply a symptom of a bigger problem. Sometimes we even go out of our way to prevent disappointment, even if it means sabotaging our own authority. Picture a four year old who is having a meltdown and his mother who is starting the countdown to consequences. ONE! TWO! She pauses, but his behavior does not change. She waits. She warns him that she was almost to three. She warns him that they would not be able to go to the park if she proceeded to three. He calls her bluff. She never makes it to three, and he knows that even if she does, they will go to the park anyway. If all good things come to those who whine, guess what you'll get? A whiner!

Lately, there has been quite a lot in the pediatric psychology journals about the benefits of occasional disappointment. Believe it or not, it seems that children who always get their way tend to be less psychologically equipped to handle the minor, every day

Edward M. Pickens, M.D.

disappointments of life when they become adults. As adults, the little things are more likely to become bigger problems, and the bigger problems are more likely to become devastating. Not only that, baseline measures of “happiness” tend to be lower in people who have a subconscious expectation that they must always get what they want in order to be happy. This is more likely to happen if they have never had to develop the skills necessary to handle minor disappointment as children. I do not want you to think that I am advocating wholesale disappointment for our children, but I do think it is important to realize that you are not being an ogre if you have to actually enforce the rules.

But getting back to the dinner table, I do not want to seem like a crazy zealot who is trying to promote unrealistic expectations. I understand that with all of the demands of the 21st Century, it is not always possible to get everyone together at the same time for a home-cooked meal. But if you find that this is the case, just make sure that there is a good balance between the healthy food and the treats. The problem starts when we treat the fast food and the junk like it is the norm and the fresh fruits and vegetables like they are the anomaly. We do not want our kids to think that in order to taste good, it has to be filled with extra sugar and saturated fat. The fast food should be the exception, and the healthier options should be the every-day fare.

However, I do not want you to fight unnecessary battles. The parents of my patients know that I put fruits and vegetables in the same category, and I also do not think that variety is important at all. The last thing I want you to do is to insist on broccoli when your child wants grapes. I have heard “experts” refer to fruits as nature’s candy, which is perhaps the most ludicrous thing I have ever heard in my life! If your child wants to eat cantaloupe, strawberries, and blueberries all day long, that is fine with me. Some children really do find certain flavors overwhelming, much more so than adults (many of us can remember gagging on certain foods as children but loving them as adults). The fact is that if children eat fruit and no green veggies at all, then they are still eating food that is natural and nutritious. When you replace processed foods with fresh produce, kids feel better, have more energy, and believe it or not, they are even less likely to be constipated!

Childhood is not all about candy and ice cream, and eating junk food is not the ticket to happiness. Being a parent is the hardest job that most of us will ever have, and it includes making unpopular decisions. Children do not know what is best for them; it is up to us as parents to figure that out. It is easier to prevent obesity than to reverse it, and it is certainly easier to establish good eating habits from the beginning than it is to try to reestablish them once the junk food genie is out of the bottle.