

Thinking Outside the Box (of French Fries)

by Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

My kids are 2 and 4 years old and will eat only chicken nuggets and pizza. If I suggest something that is not fast food or snack food, they won't eat it. Thank goodness they drink a lot of milk! If I offer soup, cheese or even fruit, they walk away. With all the talk about obesity and diabetes in kids today, how do we get our children to eat healthy meals?

Dear Parent,

Eating rituals and behaviors are definitely embedded in culture. We are living in a society of plenty that promotes both overeating and fad dieting. The fast food industry beckons us daily, exploiting our hurried lives. Many parents have "no time" to cook real meals with the intention to sit, refuel and reconnect.

We are a parenting generation that relies on juice boxes and easy-to-access munchies to manage behavior and get through the day! Today's children may not even know the physical signs of hunger and fullness. The salts and sugars in processed foods dominate the taste buds, to the point that real foods are unappealing and too much trouble to prepare. To add to the surplus of bad habits, many children are sitting in front of a screen rather than playing kickball down the street.

In facing the cultural challenges that promote disordered eating patterns and weight problems, parents need to assess their own attitudes and behaviors, stand some ground and take time out to provide real meals. Mealtime rituals are about nurturance and nourishment. Here are some ideas to help you pull yourself and your family away from some bad habits:

- Think carefully about what you can manage with respect to mealtimes, cooking and the kinds of food you can provide. This means thinking about budget, making time for meals and re-



viewing snacking rituals. This is "big thinking" and can take place in a family meeting for older children.

- Let your children know that things are going to change, i.e. no more getting into the pantry at will. You can change the rules, such as "soda is for parties and special occasions and water is for drinking any time you are thirsty." With respect to actually sitting down to a meal with hunger, another great rule might involve no snacking or eating only a light snack after school. Try bumping dinner up to a later hour to ensure good

appetites. Saying, "We'll be eating soon" or "save your appetite" teaches patience. An appetizer to tide the kids over can work, if necessary, but be very careful not to satisfy hunger prior to the meal.

- As your children reach their teenage years, you will not have the influence that you hopefully have while they are young, so establish reasonable rituals and habits early on.

- Stop being a short order cook. Make a variety of wonderful foods and have them available. Don't talk much about what is "healthy" as if it is a moral issue. Avoid our 50 billion dollar dieting industry and do not exclude any food groups. Anything forbidden can become an irresistible compulsion. Stop the adjectives about "good and bad" foods. All foods are worthy.

- Try trusting yourself so your children stand a chance in trusting their own bodies. Teach moderation, and make meals and snacks that are delicious and filling, from scratch!

- Tell your toddlers, with calm and confidence, "We are no longer eating chicken nuggets and pizza every day. Mom and dad will have lots of yummy food at meal time and we will eat whatever is prepared." Let your children be part of the meal planning. Planning and preparing food helps us model and encourage children to be grateful for the food we may so easily take for granted.

- Children are creatures of habit and will expect you to "give in," if that is your habit. Expect to be tested. As they say "no" to your roasted chicken and mashed potatoes, do not get hooked into arguing. Simply carry on, serve the wonderful food and matter-of-factly let them know that you will set aside their plates but there is no other choice.

- Be creative! Make tasty stir-fry with a sweet tasting sauce. Try using a slow cooker to make stews. Use that sandwich grill that is stored away. Keep the blender out and toss in real yogurt, mixed berries, honey and bananas for a shake. Make homemade chicken fingers! Put out cheese and crackers or fresh melon for after-school snacks. Working parents can buy or make tuna or pasta salad to have in the fridge. Fresh bread with a cream cheese spread is easy, more filling and less addictive than a bag of chips. Cut up fresh veggies and buy dip and serve with mini pita bread.

- Teach your children to prepare and cook food! They can make easy "real food" choices. School-age children can get their own breakfast and pack their own lunch. By 12 or 13, children can practice cooking simple meals- a skill that they will thank you for later.

Learn to make proper choices now, and your children won't develop weight problems or eating disorders. Even if your children have food allergies, the wisdom remains the same. Avoid too much negotiation and reactivity around food and take the time to be creative as you nourish yourself and your children.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a licensed Clinical Psychologist in private practice. Log onto www.kayabrams.com to order the CD, "Love Your Body and Your Self: Healing our Eating Disorders" or print out an article, "Whose Child is at risk for an Eating Disorder." Join her for a monthly "Parenting Coffeehouse" for inspiration about how to parent with greater calm and confidence.



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