
Enlightened Nutrition Education

- The best nutrition education helps children support and extend their intuitive eating capabilities.
 - Children aren't able to apply nutrition rules and may find them confusing and even frightening.
 - Children benefit from opportunities to learn but not from pressure.
 - Don't try to get children to change their food acceptance or their eating behavior. Trust them to make the most of what parents and other adults make available.
 - Avoid pressure. Even playful and positive outside pressure does not help and may hinder a child's progress with respect to food acceptance.
 - When evaluating a nutrition education program, consider the extent to which children are simply exposed to new foods rather than being pressured to eat new foods.
 - Use the lesson plans presented in this chapter to teach children food acceptance skills, regulation of food intake, and respect for diversity in body size and shape.
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CHAPTER 10 RAISING A HEALTHY EATER IN YOUR COMMUNITY

ALSO SEE: Satter EM; Appendix H, Nutrition Education in the Schools. *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook.* Madison, WI: Keley Press ; 2008:255-261.

So we end at the beginning. As I said quite a few pages back, the secret of feeding a healthy family is threefold: love good food, trust yourself, and teach your children to do the same. If you have been able to maintain a division of responsibility in feeding, doing your job and trusting your child to do hers, chances are your child will enjoy eating and will feel good about it. Furthermore, she will *feel* good about enjoying eating. She'll like many different foods and, she'll assume she can eat as much or as little as her body needs, even when she eats more or less than usual. She'll be comfortable with feeling hungry because she knows that she can eat enough to satisfy her hunger. She'll be comfortable with feeling full because she knows that it's natural; she'll empty out, and she'll get hungry again. She'll know how to behave around food and in social eating situations. She'll be secure in her expectation that others won't criticize her eating or try to control it. Finally, as a result of all these positive feelings, attitudes, and capabilities, she'll be confident and unselfconscious about eating. For a fun little test to check how both you and your child are doing, take a look at the "What Is a Good Eater?" box.

The problem is that you have raised a healthy eater, and now she's going out into a food- and body-crazed world. What will happen to your child's comfort and confidence with her eating and body when she goes to school? When she watches television? When she goes to the doctor's office? Girl Scouts? 4H? How do the nutrition lessons that your

child learns elsewhere support or undermine what she is learning at home?

What can you do to help and protect her? You have discovered in this book how you can swim against the tide of prevailing thought about eating, nutrition, and food selection by the way you feed yourself and your family in your home. Now we need to consider how you can help your child swim against the tide—or how you can work to *turn* the tide—*outside* your home. Your child will hear about nutri-

WHAT IS A GOOD EATER?

A "good eater" is someone who . . .

- Likes eating.
- Is interested in food.
- Feels good about eating.
- Likes being at the table.
- Can wait a few minutes to eat when hungry.
- Can try new food and learn to like it.
- Likes a lot of different foods.
- Can eat until full.
- Can stop when full.
- Can eat in other places besides home.
- Can say "no" politely when she doesn't want to eat.
- Can be around new or strange food without getting upset.
- Has pretty good table manners.
- Can make do with less-favorite food.

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tion and eating from teachers, coaches, health professionals, volunteer leaders, and other people. They all do the best they can.

They are, however, grappling with the same distorted set of ideas that have made it hard for us, and they are giving the standard negative nutrition messages. As a consequence, kids are being taught *avoidance*, they are being given directions they can't follow, and they are being taught information that they can't compute. Although most of the teaching is direct, much of it is attitudinal, as when organizers who don't make family meals a priority schedule sporting or school events at family dinner-time. The message to children? Eating with your family isn't important.

The Division of Responsibility in Nutrition Education

In chapter 3, you learned about dividing responsibilities between the parents' tasks and children's capabilities. The parent's job is feeding; the child's job is eating. The parent's job is to understand nutrition and to choose food for his or her child. The child's job is to decide whether or not to eat what is put in front of her. In child care and at school, the division of responsibility applies to adults who take on the role of parents. Adults make the nutrition decisions and provide the food. Children eat—or don't eat.

FOCUS ON CHILDREN'S CAPABILITIES

As your child has grown up at your table, and as you have executed your tasks with feeding and let your child develop her capabilities with eating, she has received *intuitive* nutrition education. She has learned about food selection and regulation with her *body*. The best nutrition education at school helps children support and extend their intuitive eating capabilities. It reinforces their trust in instinctive capabilities, and for older children, it adds an understanding of those capabilities. That understanding needs to be positive and to build on the competencies your child has developed at home. Just as at home, good nutrition education exposes children to the possibilities, lets them learn through experience, supports their love of all kinds of food, reminds them that they know how much to

eat, and helps them to remember that they have good and trustworthy bodies. For a list of children's books that support positive attitudes about food and eating, see the box called "Great Food Books for Children."

In kindergarten and possibly in first and second grades, children are allowed to have fun with food. Then, too often, the nutrition lessons start. Current nutrition education teaches children jobs that belong to adults. Children are taught avoidance of high-fat foods, instructed in the Food Guide Pyramid, and expected to be able to apply the pyramid in choosing types and amounts of food to eat. Children can't make use of such lessons. In

GREAT FOOD BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

In preparing this list, I had the fun of reading many children's books about food and eating. Most of the books emphasize exploring and learning about food and stress the joy of eating delicious food. Some talk about cooking and even growing food. With regret, I had to exclude some beautiful books because they had lines—or even words—that talked about restricting or avoiding food or eating certain foods in order to manage body size and shape. With even more regret, I found I could not endorse some very popular children's books because feeding dynamics were distorted.

For Preschoolers:

- Caseley, Judith. *Grandpa's Garden Lunch*. New York: Greenwillow, 1990.
- Ehlert, Lois. *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables from A to Z*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.
- Ehlert, Lois. *Growing Vegetable Soup*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.
- Falwell, Cathryn. *Feast for 10*. New York: Clarion, 1993.
- Goldstone, Bruce. *The Beastly Feast*. New York: Holt, 1998.
- Katzen, Mollie, and Ann Henderson. *Pretend Soup and Other Real Recipes: A Cookbook for Preschoolers and Up*. Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 1994.
- Modesitt, Jeanne. *Vegetable Soup*. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- Morris, Ann. *Bread, Bread, Bread*. New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1989.
- Shelby, Anne. *Potluck*. New York: Orchard, 1991.

For School-Age Children:

- Dooley, Norah. *Everybody Cooks Rice*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda, 1991.
- Creasy, Rosalind. *Blue Potatoes, Orange Tomatoes: How to Grow a Rainbow Garden*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994.

fact, they are confused and overwhelmed by them. Such teaching is beyond their ability to understand.

To a lesser extent, dealing with size and shape issues follows a similar pattern. The learning is exploratory and benign in the younger grades and becomes more controlling and critical as time goes on. Along with the control and criticism, children learn to feel bad about their eating and weight. Subjectively or objectively, weight standards and body comments start to creep in as health curricula, classroom and physical education teachers, school nurses, coaches, dance teachers, den leaders, and others begin to take it upon themselves to intervene with children's size and shape. Too often, educators weigh children, and even evaluate their weights using tables or other external standards. Some schools even offer size and shape interventions by putting children in special physical education and nutrition classes for the express purpose of slimming them down. In my view, such evaluations and interventions belong only in a medical setting.

DON'T TEACH CHILDREN ADULTS' TASKS

My friend Libby Jackson, a registered dietitian who is in the process of raising three healthy eaters, was mad.

"When I offered ice cream for dessert last night, Zoe [her 4-year-old] announced to me that ice cream is bad food," fumed Libby. "Bad food," said Libby, trying not to blow up or be critical. "Where did you learn that?"

"From my teachers," Zoe said.

"Oh," said Libby, in what she hoped was a neutral tone, "then what is good food?"

"I guess an apple," responded Zoe.

"I can't believe it," Libby sputtered. "Giving a child that age a message like that."

While I was concerned about the message, I was still preoccupied with dessert. "Well, what did Zoe do about her ice cream?" I asked.

"She ate it," said Libby.

It didn't seem that the message had damaged Zoe's ice cream eating. Hard to know, however, if it damaged her attitude about ice cream—or about herself for eating it. Children, like adults, don't always do what they *should* do. But they do feel bad about themselves when they don't live up to the expectations of adults who are important to them.

Zoe could parrot the doubtful wisdom about

ice cream, but she couldn't make use of it. It was beyond her mental ability to understand or apply it. So what if ice cream was bad for her? What did that mean? That it would make her clothes dirty? That it would make her wet the bed? That it would give her heart disease? What is a heart anyway, and what does disease mean? Not only that, but here was her mother, giving her something the teacher said was bad. What did that say about her mother?

Zoe isn't the only child who can't follow such directions. In Minneapolis, researchers found that students in kindergarten through the sixth grade had difficulty using the Food Guide Pyramid and other standard nutrition guidelines to evaluate the acceptability of foods. Younger children freely used terms such as "low-fat" or "low-sugar," but they had trouble naming foods in those categories. Children in the third through sixth grade still had difficulty understanding concepts like "avoid high-fat food," "eat a variety of food," and "maintain a healthy weight."¹

Why would children want to learn these rules? Provided they are being offered regular and nutritious meals and snacks in a positive environment, children have within them far more sophisticated mechanisms for achieving nutritional adequacy, regulating food intake, and maintaining a healthy weight. For a child, learning how to manage eating is like learning how to breathe. It doesn't arise. It's there, and you take it in. Children don't need "shoulds" and "oughts" to help them with their eating. They eat a food if they like it, and they like it partly because they felt comfortable and satisfied when they ate it last. Children can't plan menus or select from the wide array of available food to put together a healthy diet. They don't have to. It's not their job. It's the job of their adults to do that for them.

Rule- and avoidance-based nutrition lessons stress negativity and restraint. Such strategies are not only destructive, but they are frightening for children and absolutely contradictory to a child's approach to the world. In contrast, optimism, self-trust, and adventure are in concert with a child's way of being and doing. For children, as for adults, these seeking and exploring attitudes are good motivators.

Let me be even more blunt: We have no business teaching the Food Guide Pyramid to children. In chapter 4, we had to work *hard* with the Food Guide Pyramid to keep it from getting negative and medical *for adults*. Even

making positive use of it involves thinking abstractly, making value judgments, and keeping the rules in perspective. These ways of thinking are all completely beyond the capability of children under the age of 11 and, for many children, even ages 12 or 13.

CHILDREN AREN'T ABLE TO APPLY NUTRITION RULES

Even if children do want to learn nutrition rules, they don't have the ability. When children are under age 7 years, they can describe foods, but food only has meaning through its effect on them. Ice cream is for eating. They can't think of some far-distant effect on them from eating a food. Stringing together logical consequences like "Ice cream is high in fat and fat is bad for you and you shouldn't eat fat and you shouldn't eat ice cream either" is beyond the understanding of a child under the age of 7. Fortunately.

Such logic is even beyond the grasp of children ages 7 to 11. Second- to fifth-graders can classify. They can sort foods into the right places on the Food Guide Pyramid. However, they can't apply the classifications to choosing what they eat during the day because that involves thinking abstractly: "Eat moderately from the high-fat foods at the top of the pyramid" is meaningless to them because it involves identifying high-fat food *and* making a judgment about where ice cream fits and understanding what "moderately" means. Children in the Minnesota study couldn't name high-fat foods after a *lesson* in high-fat foods. School-age children *can* think in terms of cause and effect. However, the correlation between cause and effect has to be concrete: "If I eat ice cream it will taste good." "High in fat" and "bad for you" are not concrete issues.

At age 11, *some* children begin to think more abstractly and can apply value judgments that are beyond younger children. I have trouble understanding the concept of abstract thinking, so maybe this example will help us both. When I was a sophisticated 13-year-old, I decided to teach Doug, my 5-year-old cousin, the laws of mathematics. "I will teach you how to add," I said grandly, picking up the salt shaker and the pepper shaker. "Here is the salt shaker, that is one. How many salt shakers are there? (He answered me correctly on the first try, but I was being so patronizing, it's funny he didn't hit me.) Here is the pepper shaker, that is one. How many is that?" (Doug gave

me the right answer again—this kid was *will-ing*.)

"Now, if you put them both together, how many would that be?"

"A salt shaker and a pepper shaker," he responded.

"No, *no*," I corrected. It is *two*. Let's try it again. What happens if you put them together?"

He looked very puzzled. He looked at them and looked at me. A disgusted expression crossed his face. "Why do you want to do that?" he asked.

At 13, I could think abstractly enough to classify a pepper shaker as a "one" and I could think about adding this "one" to another "one" that was equally abstract to make a third abstract classification of "two." In fact, it may have been my own discovery of abstract thinking that led me to victimize my cousin! If I had asked Doug to give me two things off the table, he could have done it because that would be concrete. But his prelogical, literal, egocentric mind couldn't make the leap to classifying and then adding. Furthermore, he couldn't figure out why I would want to do that if it didn't have any impact on me.

Asking children to classify vegetables in a list and get those vegetables to add up to a certain number of vegetables in a day is like my failed mathematics lesson with Doug. They can't do it and they don't know why they would want to. Doug asked the right question: "Why do you want to do that?" I can ask the same about learning nutrition rules. Even the 11-year-old is much better served by the intuitive eating capabilities she grew up with than by learning the rules.

NEGATIVE LESSONS SCARE CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR BODIES

Let me give you another example of how the nutrition lessons go awry. Martha, a lovely, very slender fourth-grader, was distraught. "I'm fat!" she announced to her mother the moment she arrived home from school. "I can't eat that!" she wailed when she saw the peanut butter and crackers her mother was getting out for her snack.

Little wonder that her mother was alarmed. Like other parents of preadolescents, she was all too aware of dieting behavior in girls her daughter's age, and afraid that early preoccupation with being fat could forecast an eating disorder. Her alarm sent her for help to a for-

tunately enlightened dietitian—Libby Jackson, again—for a professional consultation.

Everything at home checked out. The mother was observing a good division of responsibility with feeding, doing her job and letting her daughter do hers. Martha was comfortable with eating and had always grown in a consistent fashion. The problem was at school. The class had been given a nutrition lesson, one that stressed to the 10- and 11-year-olds the dangers of eating fat.

Martha had made the connection that fat was bad and that when she ate fat it went right onto her body, and fat on her body was bad too, and since she ate fat, that made *her* fat. This progression doesn't make sense to us because we don't think like a 10-year-old does. But to Martha, who filtered her information through its immediate impact on *her*, it made all kinds of sense. Once she was able to understand where the distorted idea had come from, Martha's mother straightened her out. She also reassured her.

Martha's mother explained to her that all foods were good for her, including foods with fat in them. She reassured Martha that she would take care of choosing foods for her that are nutritious and have the right amount of fat. All Martha had to do was eat as much as she was hungry for.

Information about food avoidance only scares and overwhelms children; it gives them bad feelings about food and may even carry over into bad feelings about their bodies. It is frightening for children to try to carry out instructions that are beyond them. To cope, they either become rigid and try to live by illogical rules, or they give up and become rebellious. Either way, they lose. As Martha's mother demonstrated, there is something you can do about early dieting behavior. Most children who worry about their weight are doing the best they can to manage something that can't be managed without adult help. Adults can help by taking care of the what, when, and where of feeding and by reassuring children that dieting—and worrying about fat in food—isn't necessary.

Body- and food-friendly attitudes by people important to children can go a long way toward inoculating children against feeling bad about their bodies. Laid-back, positive leaders have an enormous impact on children when they help them to be successful and to develop their unique physical capability. In

contrast, few adults would deliberately make a child feel bad about her body. However, casual observations to a child linking size and shape to performance can be devastating. Medical clinics and fitness programs absolutely must not use a child's weight or percentage of body fat as a fitness indicator. Children can't choose their weight and body composition, and they must not be asked to try. But they can do something about other fitness indicators, such as endurance, strength, agility, and speed. Comparing a child to herself with respect to these indicators—and *only* to herself—allows her to experience her body as positive and capable.

Respect for the Family Unit

Most teachers of nutrition are not nutritionists—they are committed amateurs. To give them their due, people who go to the trouble of teaching nutrition to children are those who assign value to eating well. They do the best they can to act on children's behalf, and they teach from the usual understanding of nutrition.

There are, however, people who make a profession of nutrition education. The *Society for Nutrition Education* (to which I belong) publishes a journal, called—not surprisingly—the *Journal of Nutrition Education*. Nutrition educators take their work seriously and, like the amateurs, are genuinely out to improve the nutritional lives of our children.

These professionals evaluate the quality and efficacy of nutrition education programs. After an enormous review of such programs, university specialists found that the few programs that were successful in increasing children's food acceptance were programs that took significant time with nutrition education, that let children *eat or work with food*, and that involved families, schools, and communities.² After a thorough review of environmental influences on children's eating, other nutrition educators reminded readers that basic respect for the family unit was the essential means of ensuring children's health and well-being.³

Basic respect for the family unit means respecting what the family *eats* and is able to *provide*. Nutrition lessons can introduce children to new and different food. Children can go home and talk about that food with their

parents, and some parents may choose to include that new food on the menu. If nutrition messages are kept neutral, the family is involved without being criticized. But if nutrition lessons say “ice cream is bad” or “fat is bad” (or *broccoli* is bad, for that matter), it undermines the family, and the child as well.

Teaching Eating Capability

Now it's my turn to offer alternatives to the current approaches. What approaches to nutrition education help children enhance their eating capabilities while staying away from teaching them adult tasks? To demonstrate my answers, I have chosen three topic areas: food acceptance, regulation of food intake, and respect for diversity.

For the food acceptance topic, I have written a unit that teaches the process of food acceptance. It can function as an introduction to any of the good food-exploration lesson plans available (see page 185). However, in most cases those lessons don't give children any help with the actual process of food acceptance. Instead, they may feature methods of “motivating” children to taste and eat.

The box “Learning about New Food” gives examples of teaching food acceptance. My experience tells me that children will push themselves along to become familiar with and learn to eat new food. Children do poorly with food acceptance for two reasons: Too much pressure and too little opportunity to explore. Either way, they are likely to have negative feelings to overcome before they can feel comfortable with unfamiliar or disliked foods. The intent is to help children learn to tolerate their negative feelings and perhaps even overcome them.

With *food regulation* I have given more complete teaching guidelines because the topic is less familiar and concrete. The boxes “Tuning In on Eating” and “Hunger, Appetite, and Satiety” can stand alone as lesson plans. Like my food acceptance suggestions, these plans are based on experience: helping children become more aware and trusting of what goes on inside of them.

The “Respect for Diversity” lesson plan is complete but brief. I think when you get the basic idea—respect for individual differences in size, shape, and physical aptitude—you will have lots of lessons and applications of your

own. Cultural diversity lessons can be expanded to include these individual physical differences. As with cultural diversity lessons, the idea is *trust*, not *control*. This is a tough one to grapple with because of deeply embedded ideas that size and shape are voluntary. The perspective of cultural diversity will be helpful in making the shift to thinking of size, shape, and physical aptitude as *givens*, not *options*. Everybody's different. Everybody's okay the way they are. We aren't trying to make anyone over; we're simply helping them to understand and accept themselves and each other just the way they are. The idea is to make the lessons accepting and child-centered rather than setting standards and trying to make children over.

The bottom line with all the lessons is to make them positive, based on experience and free of any tactics that impose outside expectations on children. I hope these child-centered approaches, or ones like them, find their way into the hands of people who are able to take the time and energy to grapple with them. In this section, I talk with “you,” but I quite realize that you have a life. You might get an opportunity to teach positive nutrition lessons at school or Scouts. You can pass the ideas along to your child's teacher and suggest them as possibilities. In my wildest dreams, the adaptations could even find their way into teacher curricula!

Here is a message for whoever does the lessons: have fun, hang loose, and prepare to be surprised. It is alarming to face a room full of fourth-graders or kindergartners, but I think you will find the rewards are worth it. Children are interested in food and their bodies, and the topic carries the lesson. The goals of the lessons are to *slightly* increase children's awareness and comfort with food, eating, and their bodies. Accept what children say, be interested, and say “uhm-hmm.” But stay away from being a cheerleader. Cheerleading is, well, cheery, and energetic and seemingly positive, but it is pressure nonetheless.

Above all, don't try to get children to change their food acceptance or their eating behavior. You don't have to get children to eat more vegetables, and if you try you will take away their joy and initiative in learning about new food. If you are one of these wonderfully charismatic and cheerful people who is full of ideas and praise, with stickers and posters and rewards, take it easy. Use them to have fun, but don't let the fun turn into pressure. In some ways,

such positive pressure is harder to deal with than negative pressure because it is harder to identify and defend against.

If you give children opportunities to explore, the insights will emerge from the children themselves. Set up a safe environment in which children will not be shamed or challenged about their points of view. Teach children to respectfully accept whatever another person says. Nobody criticizes, nobody snickers, nobody corrects.

Food Acceptance

The best food acceptance lessons expose children to the possibilities and encourage them to explore. Children learn about food from experience. Your goal is to help children develop their familiarity and comfort with a variety of foods. It is not to get them to change or to eat five-a-day or even to discover a new favorite food. If you try, you will spoil the lesson. To review the research on food acceptance, see appendix F.

Children benefit from touching, cooking, and tasting food. They love finding out how it is grown or having a garden, discovering what different people eat, reading a book about people or animals, what they eat, and why they eat it. These lessons teach children about *food*, and they teach them about *themselves* as well. Children assume that they will learn to like the food that is put before them. You don't have to *motivate* children to learn to eat new food. You only have to support their natural inclination to learn and grow.

Help children learn food acceptance skills. See the box on the next page, "Learning about New Food."

Expose children to a wide range of foods (but leave it up to them to decide whether they eat them).

- Let them touch, smell, and work with the food.
- Help them learn where foods come from and how they are grown.
- Help them discover what people in other homes and cultures eat.
- Let them experiment with different ways of preparing food.

TEACHING FOOD ACCEPTANCE LESSONS

If you love good food, enjoy eating, and trust children to explore and learn, you will be a

good teacher. For some children, it may be a novel idea to feel positive and relaxed about food and eating. To become comfortable with new foods, children need to be exposed to them without being traumatized by the exposure. As you work with different foods and react to children's comments, be careful not to say or imply that some food is healthier or better than other food. Such value judgments merely confuse children and put a barrier between them and their eating. You made the value judgment when you chose the food. Children don't have to make a value judgment when they eat it.

As we said in chapter 3, children are capable of learning to accept new kinds of food. When presented with something unfamiliar to eat, most are both curious and dubious. They will explore it—in their own way—but they probably won't like a food the first time they taste it. Beyond the initial exposure, given the proper support, they make it their business to learn to like new foods. The proper support is an adult to offer the food to them, time after time, with no praise or pressure. Given this positive opportunity, children learn at their own pace to like the food. Children who are bold and inquisitive will be more likely to taste and experiment. Others who are more cautious or indifferent may limit themselves at first to looking and touching. But even cautious children will move themselves along if they are given repeated neutral access to the food (again, no pressure or praise).

CHILDREN MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY WITH FOOD ACCEPTANCE

When a child is *really* cautious or put off by trying new food, it is usually because of past experience. She may have been forced to eat more or different food than she wanted to, or she may have been sheltered from unfamiliar foods by family menus that were limited to foods that she could readily accept. Sometimes a child has been both sheltered and forced: the cook catered to the child, then made her eat the special food whether she wanted to or not. Families who have tight food budgets sometimes limit menus to what a child can readily accept, feeling they can't afford to serve foods that she doesn't eat.

Parents of a very cautious child may have given up on offering new food experiences. It isn't very rewarding to introduce anything new to a cautious child. Often, adults working

with cautious children resort to pushing them along, which is a mistake because it makes the child feel both controlled and cautious. Children always do more and dare more if they feel they have control. The cautious child benefits from learning to cope with herself. You can help by both challenging and reassuring her: "When you are ready, you may like to eat this. For now, you might just like to taste it and then take it back out of your mouth. But you don't have to do that, either."

Bold or cautious, children learning food

acceptance need tools for approaching food, and they need an escape hatch. Establish the ground rules: Children have to be polite about accepting and refusing food, and they can't make negative remarks about the food. From there on, children benefit from receiving both encouragement that they can manage and reassurance that they don't have to eat. The suggestions made earlier for how to teach children to approach new foods incorporate both tools and an escape. When children (and adults) are comfortable in their eating envi-

LEARNING ABOUT NEW FOOD

Everybody has favorite foods and some foods they don't like at all. Some people enjoy tasting new food and learning to like it; others can't imagine feeling that way and stay away from eating new food whenever they can. Most people are somewhere in between. In our food lessons, you don't have to eat anything you don't want to eat. There are lots of ways for you to take part in the lessons without having to eat. You can have fun learning where foods come from, how they are grown, and what children in other homes and cultures eat, and you can even help prepare foods.

Before you can feel comfortable working with and learning about food, you need to know how to refuse to eat the food. Whether or not you like to taste new foods, sooner or later someone is going to offer you a food that you do not want to eat. You don't have to eat it, but you do have to figure out how to be firm and polite about saying no. In these lessons, you can say "no, thank you" and expect that your teacher and classmates will take "no" for an answer.

Learn to Say "No, Thank You"

Pair off in twos and have one child be a pushy host and the other one be the guest who doesn't want to eat what is offered. Then have the children trade places. The host can run through all the statements, and the guest can practice being polite but firm and not yelling or getting mad.

What the host can say:

"Have some of this wonderful _____."

"I made it especially for you!"

"You should eat it—it's very good for you."

"I can't understand why you don't like it—I like it a lot."

(Kids will have their own ideas and experiences of what people have said to them to get them to eat.)

What the guest can say:

"No, thank you. I don't care for any."

"No, thank you. I don't care for any."

(The guest says the same thing over and over

again. Teach the kids that this is the "stuck CD" approach, where the answer is always the same, no matter what the host says.)

Having Fun with Food

What are some of the pleasures of working with food? Practice working with the food without feeling you have to eat it or even taste it.

Look at the food and touch it. You don't have to put it in your mouth.

What are some of the ways you can have fun with food? You can learn about the color, shape, and texture of the food and the designs it makes when it is cut and arranged on a serving plate.

Join in with the cooking lesson. This might make you curious about the food and feel like you want to taste it. But you don't have to.

Learning to Eat New Food

Everybody's different with what they like to eat. Foods taste different to different people. It takes time to learn to like new foods. Some of the foods we make in school will be foods your family eats; others will be new to you. Usually familiar foods taste best to us, but you can also learn to like new foods. It helps to like a lot of different foods because that can give you pleasure and let you eat in lots of different places with lots of different people. If you feel you want to taste a new food, take it slowly. Here are some ways you can sneak up on a new food.

Look at the food; smell it. Do you still feel like tasting it? You don't have to if you don't want to. Every time you get a chance, look at and smell the food, but don't taste it until you're ready.

Put a small amount in your mouth. Taste it, feel it in your mouth, and maybe chew it. Do you feel like swallowing it? You don't have to if you don't want to. Don't make a fuss about it. Just keep a paper napkin handy and quietly spit it out.

Swallow that first bite, and then decide what to do next. You might find you like the food and want to eat more. You might find that one bite is all you want.

ronment and have the conviction that they don't have to eat if they don't want to, they become interested in learning to like new foods. It is natural for children—and adults—to seek diversity with food, just as they do in other areas of life.

Keep in mind that the goal of this lesson is to introduce children to the possibilities, not to have them learn a new behavior or change their eating habits. Learning to like a new food takes 10 or 15 or more neutral exposures, and it's unlikely that children will get that many exposures in the classroom. However, if the classroom teams up with the school lunchroom, magic can happen. A friendly and interested school nutrition provider can plan menus in tandem with classroom food acceptance lessons. Or foods for classroom lessons can be chosen from the school lunch menu. Either way, foods children work with in the classroom can appear again and again on the school lunch menu. Eventually, most children will learn to like most foods.

DEALING WITH CULTURAL ISSUES IN FOOD ACCEPTANCE

It is essential to cultivate an attitude of acceptance of differences in food selection and eating patterns. If a child learns to say "How can you eat that?" to another child, it means "I don't respect you or your family." In the chapter 4, you learned the *Mother Principle* for planning meals. Every culture and family has its own Mother Principle that governs what goes on the table to make up a meal. It is not good to criticize someone else's mother.

People eat what they can. Parents of different cultures and economic circumstances feed their children the best they can. Unfortunately, in our nutrition-deranged society, it is socially acceptable to criticize politically incorrect, unsophisticated, or even unfamiliar food. Such snobbishness isn't acceptable to me, and it doesn't have to be acceptable to you.

It is needlessly unkind to ridicule the food preferences of other times, places, or people. Whatever the reason for sneering at someone's food, it isn't valid. Deriding someone's food scorns their culture and their family and their history. All people have used considerable ingenuity to make do with what they have, to survive on it and even to create valued food traditions. Look at tripe. Look at duck's feet. Look at caviar. The respectful study of food and food traditions offers children a vivid understanding

of what people of other cultures and eras were up against and how they managed.

Look at fry bread. American Indian fry bread is a delicious, filling, greasy, and therefore politically incorrect staple of native American people across the country. If you scout around in your local food emporium, you might even find WoodenKnife Indian Fry Bread Mix,* a South Dakota product that contains prairie turnips, one of the most important wild foods that was gathered by Lakota Indians. Rent the video *Smoke Signals* if you want to see what fry bread looks like. This simple food commemorates a people's joyous coping with difficult circumstances. In the late 1800s, Indian mothers forced to live on reservations learned to use their government food commodities to make fry bread for their hungry families.

CURRICULA ON FOOD ACCEPTANCE

Are there some good food acceptance curricula available? Possibly. In the two-year 5-a-Day Power Plus Study done in St. Paul, Minnesota, children significantly increased their fruit and vegetable consumption both at school and at home. The intervention consisted of 28 lessons or classroom curricula over two years, 10 take-home activity packets, and exposure to additional vegetable and fruit choices in the School Nutrition Program. The National Cancer Institute (NCI) has sponsored 5-a-Day school intervention programs that appear to do equally well with increasing fruit and vegetable consumption. Unfortunately, the NCI program also emphasizes fat restriction.⁴

How do these results square up, asks Mary Ray Worley, my extremely perceptive editor, with my earlier statements that adults shouldn't try to alter what and how much children eat? Most children don't eat enough fruits and vegetables, so increasing consumption is a legitimate outcome of nutrition education. The important distinction is in how you arrive at that outcome. Is it by offering children opportunities to learn, or is it by putting pressure on them to change? Nutrition lessons that pressure children to eat fruits and vegetables (by teaching them that they are healthful foods and telling them how many they "should" eat) don't work in the long run. Like similar lessons for adults, they make children feel guilty or wary but don't alter children's food consump-

*If you can't find it, write to WoodenKnife Co. Mfg., Box 104, Interior, SD 57750; or call 605-433-5463.

tion. In contrast, curricula like the ones above that include family and school nutrition components increase children's exposure to fruits and vegetables. Such exposure boosts their long-term food acceptance, provided that exposure isn't accompanied by pressure to eat. Otherwise, when the pressure is off, children stop eating fruits and vegetables.

In contrast, the CATCH (Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health) Eat Smart curriculum, funded by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, invested 25 percent more teaching time than the Power Plus curriculum and showed no change in fruit and vegetable consumption. The CATCH study emphasized fat and sodium avoidance, encouraged increasing physical activity, and recommended that children eat more fruits and vegetables. The trial lowered fat consumption and increased regular physical activity.

When evaluating any nutrition education curriculum, including the Power Plus and NCI curricula, it is vitally important to consider the extent to which children are simply *exposed* to new foods, in contrast to their being "motivated" to eat new foods. I don't feel comfortable with "motivating" other people to do anything because I consider it paternalistic and controlling. Exposing children to the possibilities and teaching them to cope is fine. Motivating them is not. Pushing from the outside—even positive pushing—makes children feel bad and slows their learning and growth. If you cheer, reward, monitor, and motivate children to eat fruits and vegetables, they will eat vegetables while you keep up the outside encouragement and stop once the pressure stops. The goal is not to get children to eat fruits and vegetables today, it is to help them master eating fruits and vegetables for a lifetime. To do that, children have to make use of their own drive for mastery to push them along, without pressure from the outside.

Regulation of Food Intake

The goal of lessons about food regulation is to reinforce children's intuitive understanding that their bodies know how to eat and grow. The lessons make conscious the unconscious mechanisms that children (and the rest of us) use to manage the amount of food they eat: their feelings of hunger, appetite, and satiety. Food regulation lessons support children in trusting their

internal regulators. Teaching food regulation is a consciousness-raising activity, and that's *all*. There are no rules or guidelines attached to how much children *should* eat.

Teach children about their internal regulators of hunger, appetite, and satiety.

- Teach "your body will tell you how much is enough"
- Define hunger, appetite, and satiety in neutral terms (see the box "Hunger, Appetite, and Satiety").
- Have children talk about their experience of hunger, appetite, and satiety.
- Do an eating exercise (see the box "Tuning In on Eating") to give children experience with paying attention to how they feel inside when they eat.
- Have children talk about what they can do to help themselves become aware of their internal regulators. Ideas might be to slow down, to avoid doing other things while they eat, to talk with friends about the food, or to shut their eyes when they taste.

TEACHING FOOD REGULATION LESSONS

If you know and trust your own internal regulators of hunger, appetite, and satiety, you will be able to help children with theirs. Your task is to help children learn about, explore, and trust their own capabilities. Set up the activity, take an interest, and say, "uhm-hmm." Reiterate the expectation that children be accepting and non-critical with themselves and each other. Children need a safe environment so they can learn and grow, and they need not to be traumatized by new experience.

The internal cues that regulate food intake, hunger, appetite, and satiety are hard to teach because they are so subjective. For younger children, just giving the message "Your body knows how much you need to eat" is enough. You can take it a little further if you want to and have them do a little self-awareness exercise: "How does it feel inside when you are empty and when you are full?" "Do you feel like it is all right to be hungry?" "Do you feel like it is all right to be full?" No matter what a child says, you can say, "Sometimes people feel like that. When they aren't sure they are going to get enough to eat, it can be scary to be hungry." Or, "Sometimes people feel upset when they get too full. It is okay to feel full after you eat. You will empty out and get hungry again."

For older children, experiment with the

HUNGER, APPETITE, AND SATIETY

When you are hungry, you might feel like something is gnawing on your stomach or like your stomach is growling. You might feel weak, or grouchy, or like you can't sit still. You might get a headache or have a hard time paying attention to your teacher.

Appetite is when you want food that you like. Your appetite tells you when something will taste good to you. It also makes you eat a lot of different foods, and it lets you enjoy your eating.

Satiety is when you feel ready to quit eating. It is when all those body feelings that say you want to eat go away and you feel better. Usually food still tastes good even after you stop being hungry. But then your appetite goes away, too, and food doesn't taste so good anymore. Pay attention, but keep eating until you feel like quitting. Your body know it needs enough food to satisfy both hunger and appetite.

Sometimes people keep eating until they feel full. That's all right. Most people like being full sometimes. When you are growing fast or being really active, a lot of times you might eat until you feel full because you need more to eat. Sometimes meals are so good that you just want to be full. Sometimes being full helps you to relax or to fall asleep. Other times it just keeps you awake.

If you keep on eating past being full, you will

begin to feel stuffed. Stuffed is when you can't eat another bite. Most people find they don't like that feeling because it is uncomfortable. Maybe you have eaten until you were stuffed by mistake, like on Thanksgiving Day. The food tasted so good that you kept right on eating. Then it caught up with you, and you felt like you couldn't move. Sometimes people eat until they are stuffed because they don't know when they are going to get to eat again. Have you ever been hungry and unsure about when you were going to get to eat? It's a scary feeling, isn't it?

People who aren't sure they will get enough to eat feel they have to eat as much as they can while they have food available. In between times, they don't just get hungry, they become famished. It doesn't feel good to be too hungry, especially if you don't know that you can make the hunger go away. When people are famished, lots of times they eat fast and eat until they are stuffed because it feels so bad to be famished.

There is no right or wrong way to eat. There are just choices. Most people do best with eating when they have meals and snacks at about the same times every day. Then they can go to the table hungry, but not famished, and they can eat until they are satisfied but not stuffed.

focused eating exercise in the box "Tuning In on Eating." Have children pay attention to how they feel while they eat a simple food. Making a special effort to be aware while they eat begins to make conscious the processes that, for most children and adults, are unconscious. Doing a focused eating exercise in a classroom setting is fun and full of surprises. Children often giggle and act silly, but they get something out of it nonetheless.

Let me stress again that the goal of the food regulation work is not to try to change the way a child eats. The focused eating exercise is not a technique to slim down the fat child or fatten up the skinny child. It is a way to help children become more aware of what goes on inside of them. If you can be accepting and interested in what they say about their own experience, you will help them be more comfortable and accepting about who they are and how they eat. Paradoxically, once children (and other people) feel more comfortable with themselves and their eating, they are able to change and grow. But your task isn't to change them—it is to understand and accept them. Your understanding and acceptance will help them to understand and accept themselves.

CHILDREN MAY HAVE TROUBLE WITH FOOD REGULATION

As with food acceptance, you may encounter some children who don't seem to have intuitive capabilities with food regulation. Such children may be puzzled about the idea that they can experience hunger and satiety and may say, "I don't feel anything" or "I just eat as much as my mom tells me." All you have to do is respond, "That's all right. Those sensations are there, even if you can't feel them right now. I think if you keep paying attention, you will start to feel something." For your own information, let me give you some background on children who can't tune in on their hunger, appetite, and satiety.

As I pointed out in my September 1996 article in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, "Internal Regulation and the Evolution of Normal Growth as the Basis for Prevention of obesity in childhood," children are born with the ability to eat the right amount of food to get the body that is right for them. The ability to self-regulate will be preserved if the people who feed them maintain a division of responsibility in feeding, trusting them to eat as much or as little as they want.

TUNING IN ON EATING

Your body knows how much you need to eat. It has some ways of telling you. Does anybody know what it feels like when your body needs food?

Your body needs a lot of different kinds of food. Usually, food tastes best when we don't have to eat the same thing all the time. Has anybody had the feeling that you want to eat something in particular? Have you ever really liked something but still not felt like eating it?

Your body knows when you have had enough. What does it feel like inside when you are ready to stop eating?

Let's do a little experiment to see if you can find any of those feelings inside of you. Let's experiment with this food (crackers, potato chips, strawberries, M&M's).

First, you need to close your eyes and relax. That way, you can settle down so other feelings and sensations go away for a while. While you relax, pay attention to how your breathing goes in and out. We will do that for 30 seconds; so take your time and settle down.

Now, open your eyes and pick up your food. Don't eat it yet. Just look at it and smell it and touch it. What does it feel like inside of you when you do that? Do you feel like you want to eat it? What does that feel like? Does anybody not want to eat it? What does that feel like?

Shut your eyes again to get settled down.

(About five breaths in and out.) Now open your eyes and look at your food. When you are ready, if you feel like it, eat the food. Pay close attention to what happens in your mouth and in your body. Does anybody want to say what that felt like? Did anybody have positive feelings, like you enjoyed it? Did anybody have negative feelings, like you didn't like eating this food?

Did anybody feel like you didn't want to swallow? You have a napkin, you can spit your food into that if you want to.

Shut your eyes again to get settled down. (About five seconds.) Now open them and look at your food again. Eat another bite, if you feel like it. What did you notice this time? Was it the same as before? Was it different?

All right, now sit quietly at your desk and eat as much of your food as you like. Pay attention to every bite of food. Chew it up and swallow it before you take another bite. What was that like for you? Did it feel like it was too fast? Too slow? Did you enjoy the food?

That's all. This is a little exercise to help you to be more aware of how your body helps you with your eating. If you pay attention, your body can do a better job of helping you.

What do you think makes it hard for you to know what goes on inside of you when you eat? What can you do to be more aware?

Self-regulation will be undermined if adults try to dictate the amounts or types of food that children eat. For more background and references on food regulation, see appendix E, "Children and Food Regulation."

Children who lack intuitive eating capabilities have real difficulty as they begin to move away from their parents and spend more time in the outside world. Children can't put it into words, but they are aware that they don't know how to eat, and their efforts to manage eating can turn into distorted or even disordered eating patterns. Internal capability can be rebuilt, but usually the child requires lessons that go beyond those that can be offered in the classroom. For a child to trust internal regulation, both school and home have to provide structure, give opportunities to learn, and trust the child to eat the right amount and type of food.

CURRICULA ON FOOD REGULATION

Generally, curricula that teach about food regulation do so from the point of view of stressing weight management. To manage weight,

fat restriction is emphasized, as is increasing the child's physical activity. From the opposite perspective, programs for school-age children that are designed to prevent eating disorders stress avoidance of dieting and physical self-acceptance. Such programs often teach the Food Guide Pyramid and assume that if children eat off the pyramid, they will be able to manage their body weight.

Both sets of programs appear to have little impact on children's weight management behaviors. Children weigh the same, whether or not they have had school-based interventions for weight management.⁵ Children who have been warned off restrained eating appear to have gone back to it within a couple of years of the intervention.⁶

Is the approach I recommend effective? I assume so, because what I teach is normal food regulation. The goal of my approach is not to get children to be thin or to warn them away from dieting. The goal of my approach is to support children's capability with tuning in on and respecting their internal regulators of hunger, appetite, and satiety. When children

are in tune with their internal regulators, they eat and grow in a stable and consistent fashion, and they achieve the adult body that is right for them.

Respect for Diversity in Body Size and Shape

In the food acceptance unit, we talked about studying and accepting cultural diversity. Here, we will focus on accepting different body sizes and shapes. The theme of all the units is that “everybody’s different” with respect to food preference, energy requirements, and body size and shape. Whenever you help children to trust their eating, you help them to trust and accept their bodies. Here, we are being more direct in emphasizing the goodness of children’s bodies and how they work.

The issue of diversity teaches facts, but the most important lessons are attitudinal. By reinforcing the notion that “everybody’s different” with respect to food preference, energy requirements, body size, shape, and physical capability, you can help children to correct contemptuous or disdainful attitudes toward themselves and other people.

TEACHING SIZE AND SHAPE ACCEPTANCE

Lessons on size and shape have to be handled with particular care so they don’t single out or embarrass anyone. Given the struggles adults have in this area, it may not be easy for you to be relaxed and accepting about children and their bodies. In fact, if you have trouble accepting children of all sizes and shapes, this unit would be better taught by someone who is more relaxed about physical diversity.

Everybody *is* different. Some people are fat, some are thin, some are tall, some are short. Some people eat a lot and some people don’t eat so much. In most cases the way people eat doesn’t have much to do with how they are shaped. Today, children and even some adults think that they can eat or exercise to get their bodies to turn out the way they want them to. They can’t. Size and shape are determined mostly by genetics, not by what they *do*.

In building physical self-esteem, the first task is for children to get a clear and accurate image of their own size and shape. A young child is interested in herself, and she will enjoy tracing around her outline on a big piece of paper,

measuring to see how tall she is, drawing pictures of herself and her family, writing stories about her eyes and hair and skin color and, yes, about her size and shape. I don’t recommend weighing children. Given all the weight consciousness in our culture, it’s too easy to get into value judgments and negative comparisons. Children can handle it, but adults can’t.

Older children have the additional task of becoming more conscious of ideas and expectations about size and shape and making positive use of those ideas. The theme for the older school-age child is *industry*. Children at around ages 10 through 12 want to *achieve*, and they look to adults for ways to do that. Because older children are oriented toward doing and achieving, it seems natural to them that body size and shape can be done and achieved like other tasks. They assume they can pick out a particular body and get it through their own efforts. As a consequence, for older children it is important to emphasize the parts of the lesson that point out that size and shape are not optional. For preadolescents, it may be helpful to talk about what to expect concerning growth and development and to emphasize individual differences in times and rates of growing. Then turn their energies away from waiting and worrying about what nature has in mind for them and toward more productive avenues for doing and achieving. Developing skills with physical activity and cooking, for example, are both directions that can support and enhance their feelings of self-confidence.

CHILDREN HAVE THEIR OWN ISSUES WITH SIZE AND SHAPE ACCEPTANCE

It’s important to remember that the topic of physical self-acceptance is quite different from the child’s point of view than it is from our own. For instance, the preschooler and young school-age child begin to be conscious of their own and others’ bodies. Often children ask, “Am I fat?” or “Am I skinny?” Adults get all upset about such questions because they immediately jump to the conclusion that “fat” or “skinny” is being used as a taunt, that the child is being made the target of teasing, and that it will scar her for life. Parents, teachers, and other caring adults are quick to say, “No, dear, you’re not skinny, you’re just slender.” They may go on to say, “Everybody’s different, some people are slender and some are fat.” The really worried parent might say, “But don’t worry about it, you’ll grow out of it.”

EVERYBODY'S DIFFERENT

Get children started thinking about natural differences in the sizes and shapes of people's bodies.

- Think of adults who are tall or thin or short or fat (this might be people on television or in movies).
- Talk about how people in different cultures vary in size and shape: Fulani people in northern Africa are very tall and slender. Pygmy people are very small.

Introduce the idea that different people naturally eat different amounts and that that is all right.

- Can you think of anybody who is small and slender who eats a lot?
- Can you think of anybody who is large and heavy who doesn't eat very much? Lots of times, thin people eat more than fat people.

Introduce the notion that there are natural differences in people's size, shape, eating, and activity. Point out that a person's size and shape are not optional. When people are babies, some babies are active and eat a lot, other babies are not so active and don't eat so much.

- Do you know somebody who is strong?
- Do you know somebody who can run fast?
- Do you know somebody who seems to feel best when moving around?
- Do you know somebody who seems to like sitting still?
- What are you like?

By now, the alert child participating in this conversation will have figured out that there is something really wrong with being skinny, especially if that child is looking for *information* rather than reassurance. It's like the old joke in which the little boy comes home and asks, "Where did I come from?" His resolute and prepared father, anticipating the moment, presents the whole sex education story, complete with charts and pictures and positive values. His puzzled son responds, "What does that have to do with it? Johnny said he was from New York and I want to know where I came from."

"Am I skinny?" could mean just that. Find out. The answer (if it fits) is "Well, you're pretty slender. But I wouldn't call you skinny because usually when people say that they are teasing. Why do you ask?" *Keep in mind* that "skinny" might be a pejorative term only in *your* mind.

For your child, it could be a simple descriptive term.

In his book *Walking across Egypt*, Clyde Edgerton told of Mattie Rigsbee telling her girlhood story of running angrily inside to tell her grandmother that Tom Sykes had said her legs were skinny. "Well, honey, they are a mite thin," commented her grandmother. What was her grandmother telling her? "Well, your legs are thin, but it doesn't worry me. You might as well get used to the idea."

The issue here is not striving for the ideal but accepting children the way they are and assuming they will do the same with themselves. Part of growing up is coming to terms with what nature has given. There is no reason the thin child or the fat child should feel bad about herself, but she does have to come to grips with her body and accepting herself just the way she is.

DEALING WITH CULTURAL ISSUES IN SIZE AND SHAPE ACCEPTANCE

For older children, the issue of physical self-esteem gets more intense as they start to grapple with cultural ideals. Often, children try to conform to the cultural ideal by dieting. In a Cincinnati study of grade 3 through 6 middle-income children, researchers found that 45 percent were dieting, some as young as the third grade. Newer studies have found the same thing, but this study asked about dieting behavior of the parents. It appeared children were more likely to become anxious and preoccupied with size, shape, and eating if those were issues for their parents.⁷

An article in *Girls' Life* magazine reinforces the point.⁸ Most preadolescent readers said they were realistic and accepting of even less-than-perfect size and shape in themselves and their friends. However, they acknowledged that they still talk about the topic a lot. The author explained the discrepancy by pointing out that body size and shape talk is simply girl talk, similar to boy talk about sports.

The magazine's downplaying of the dieting concern may be self-serving, since the major content of *Girls' Life* seems to be clothes, weight, and boys, all topics that tend to focus concern on size and shape.* However, I can still go

*For girl-focused magazines that are broader in subject matter, check out *New Moon* for preadolescents and its older sister magazine and *HUES: Hear Us Emerging Sisters*. You can track down both by calling 800-381-4743.

along with the author's theory, to a point. I have noticed that most times, preadolescent dieting has more of a hobby quality to it than being anything too alarming. Girls talk about dieting, then they find something in the lunchroom they like and fall off their diets. Then they say, "Oh, I am so gross," and they giggle and squeal. They go to a party and "pig out" (which is, by the way, normal food-exploration behavior for kids that age and *not* binge eating), and they giggle and squeal again.

However, some children are dead serious about dieting. About a third of *Girls' Life* readers did have a negative body image. Of those, 80 percent or more reported being told by their moms to diet, work out, and quit eating junk food. Moms, out of their concern or fear for daughters, were inadvertently sending messages that were crushing the girls' self-confidence. A Massachusetts study looked at mothers of eating-disordered daughters. The mothers themselves often had distorted eating attitudes and behaviors. They were uncomfortable with their daughter's appearance and that thought that their daughters should lose weight.⁹

The part of you that is a teacher can now legitimately reach the conclusion that if a child gets a lot of family pressure about eating, size, and shape, there is only so much you can do to help her. The part of you that is a parent may be squirming by now, and I am sorry for that. However, I must be blunt: If the shoe fits, wear it. You are important to your daughter, and your attitude toward her will make an enormous difference in the way she feels about her body. However, it is virtually impossible to be accepting of your daughter's—or your son's—body if you can't be accepting of your own.

Afraid to Eat

In supporting children's eating capabilities and emphasizing acceptance of size diversity, you may be doing more for children than you realize. You will also be swimming against the tide. In her book *Afraid to Eat*, Frances Berg captures the dilemma of today's children as they grapple with their weight: "Instead of growing up with secure and healthy attitudes about their bodies, eating and themselves, many kids fear food and fear being fat." Berg stresses that it is a "national crisis" that attempts at dieting are common in the third grade and even earlier. She is right. Berg emphasizes that health goals for children need to emphasize normal eating, active living,

self-respect, and appreciation of size diversity. She's right. Berg points out that the backward (my word) U.S. health policy contributes to this crisis by emphasizing obesity and weight loss rather than maintaining nutritional status. Berg points out how seriously our health policy suffers, especially when compared with the Canadian Vitality program, which says "Eat well, be active, and feel good about yourself." Still again, she's right.

Although public health policy isn't a household issue, it permeates our thinking about eating, weight, and even what we know. As the results of periodic national nutrition surveys are released to the public, we are treated to headlines that decry the shocking increase in child and adolescent obesity. Those same surveys unearth even more startling findings that we rarely hear about—data about the extent to which our teenagers are starving themselves and suffering from nutritional deficiencies. While nutritional health of preadolescents remains pretty good, the quality of adolescent diets has markedly decreased to the point that teenage girls have the poorest nutrition of any age group in the United States. Most girls and many boys eat so poorly that they compromise their growth and development and their lifelong physical health. They eat so poorly that they can't think straight, their emotional stability is sabotaged, and their social development is obstructed. Why don't we hear about it? It isn't the priority. The priority is weight. Survey data about nutritional status is analyzed late and released quietly to the public, if at all.

U.S. public health policy identifies obesity as the nation's number one health concern, and dietary fat control for disease avoidance is number two. Eating well to build healthy strong bodies and minds is addressed only incidentally. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control publication *Guidelines for School Health Programs to Promote Lifelong Healthy Eating* identifies "healthy eating" using those priorities: weight management and dietary fat reduction. Many nutrition education curricula are written emphasizing these concerns. As a result, messages become the negative and avoidant ones I have been complaining about throughout this book.

EATING DISORDERS

Obsessive dieting becomes a public health policy concern only when carried to the extremes evident in eating disorders. Estimates vary on

the incidence of eating disorders. Some sources say that 0.5 percent of people develop anorexia, and 3 percent develop bulimia. Frances Berg says that 1 in 10 teenage girls develop an eating disorder. Whatever the incidence, it is too high.

Policy makers don't seem to notice the contradiction of promoting dieting on the one hand and deploring eating disorders on the other. Is there a connection? In my experience, there is, but it may not be what you think. Dieting doesn't cause eating disorders, but it can make a child unconsciously choose distorted eating as a way of acting out overwhelming emotional and social distress. By way of explaining what I mean, let me give you an example.

Mary didn't know how to eat. She had been restricted by her mother ever since the doctor had pronounced her too fat at age 6 months. Under her mother's careful control, Mary had slimmed down and remained slim until she was 11. At that point, a family crisis put her mother out of commission. Not only did Mary's mother stop cooking, she stopped restricting Mary's food intake. Since she had grown up with external control, Mary had long since lost any natural ability to regulate her food intake. Lacking either external or internal control, Mary's eating became chaotic. She ate whenever and whatever she could, and she ate as much as she could hold. In a few months, she gained over 30 pounds. She went to a commercial weight loss clinic and dieted to force her weight down, but, as she put it, "The minute my weight hit bottom I started eating and gained it all back and more besides." I met her when she was 19 years old. By then she had become seriously bulimic.

Because she and her family had a lot of emotional problems, and because eating had been such an issue all along, Mary acted out her distress with eating. She had understandably gotten the idea that she had to be thin to be successful in life. Other children, who don't have the eating issues, might act out significant distress in other ways: by going defiantly dirty or by exorbitantly puncturing body parts or by becoming rebellious or promiscuous or by abusing alcohol or drugs. Generally, children unconsciously choose the issues that most concern their families as the ones they use to act out their upset and confusion. With Mary, eating was an obvious choice.

Other children who have lost touch with their internal regulators but are able to deal with their feelings more effectively and direct-

ly don't develop eating disorders. They do, however, have an eating problem when they get into middle and later grade school. At that point their world widens so that parents can no longer supervise what and how much they eat, and they are left with no tools for managing their eating. Many times children without internal controls overeat, the way Mary did. Other children resort to rigidly imposing the same rules that were used at home. A child may talk about "dieting" as a way of describing the rigid control she uses to try to manage her food intake.

Teaching about Nutrition

I have focused our lesson plans on *food* and *experience*. I haven't recommended any nutrition lessons. Nutrition lessons emphasize learning with the head, and they focus on nutrients in food and the impact of those nutrients on the body. Unfortunately, but too frequently, nutrition lessons open up the whole Pandora's box of rules. "Shoulds" and "oughts" crop up, along with the messages about avoidance.

Children do enjoy learning about nutrients, where they come from and what those nutrients do in the body. Children like learning that carrots contain vitamin A and that vitamin A can help them see in the dark. But children won't eat carrots because carrots contain vitamin A. They eat carrots because carrots are familiar and because they taste good.

For children, learning about nutrition is learning for its own sake, just like it's fine to learn how airplanes fly or where drinking water comes from. We don't expect children to use information about aerodynamics to fly their own airplanes or water purification to sanitize their own water. It's equally unrealistic to give them nutrition lessons and expect them to choose their own food and plan their own diets.

Adults, not children, are the ones who have to act on nutrition lessons and apply them to food selection. Even so-called kid-friendly nutrition messages, like "go, slow, and whoa foods" or "traffic light lists" (red-, yellow- and green-light food) are subjective and value laden and beyond a child's ability to comprehend. Kids are literal, black-and-white thinkers. A food is good or bad; it's either go or whoa, red or green. You eat it or you don't. In a child's mind, if it is on the table and the child likes it,

she will eat it until she gets enough or the supplies run out. Kids automatically eat moderately, but for them there is no such thing as *deciding* to eat moderately.

If certain foods are “slow” or “yellow light” foods—foods to eat occasionally or in moderation—then adults are the ones who have to see to that. For instance, consider my controversial and alarming dessert recommendation. I encourage adults to put the child’s portion of dessert by her plate when the table is set and allow her to eat it when she wants it: before, during, or after the meal. Once that serving is gone, however, no more dessert. I don’t recommend letting children have unlimited quantities of dessert. Most children can’t be moderate with sweets; adults need to help them. The principle is that while children push themselves along to like new foods, they also take the easy way out when it is offered. Although it takes many tries to learn to like a new vegetable, with a new dessert, you generally get one-trial learning.

Help in Other Places

Raising your healthy eater is not strictly a do-it-yourself project. Many people will help you feed your child. According to the Agricultural Research Service (*Research News—USDA*), on any given day nearly half of 3- to 5-year-olds consumed some food or drink outside the home, most often at someone else’s house. Roughly two-thirds of children over age 6 ate elsewhere, most often at the school cafeteria. If you make arrangements for other dependable and loving adults to feed your child, you are executing your responsibilities in feeding and your child will feel secure and provided for. You are wise to depend on other people to help expose your child to a variety of food. Moreover, you *have* to depend on others to teach her to eat in a variety of social settings. That is all to the good.

When she eats at a friend’s house or at school, your child may be offered foods she doesn’t like. She needs to know how to politely say “no, thank you.” She may be asked to use unfamiliar dishes or serving methods. She needs to know how to observe what everyone else does and follow along. In other words, you can give her a little coaching so she can learn to manage.

For the most part, children can cope, and they take *pride* in coping. At times, however,

you may have to be your child’s advocate, as one mother found with a situation in her son’s school lunchroom. He was being traumatized by the rule that he had to eat everything on his plate. She hesitated for a long time before she talked with his teacher. The teacher couldn’t change the rule, so the mother went to the school lunch supervisor. The supervisor said she couldn’t change the rule either because it came from the administration.

The principal knew where the rule came from, and he didn’t see any problem with it. He was a bean counter. He didn’t like having children throw away food. Like a lot of people, he assumed that the solution to the problem of food waste was to make children clean their plates. The mother raised his consciousness. She explained the principles of food acceptance to him, and pointed out that when children are coerced into eating they eat less well, not better. Most important, she told him how miserable her son was, and *that* made an impression.

Together, the principal and the mother talked with the school lunch supervisor, who recommended they go to the offer-versus-serve policy, which would allow children to turn down two food items at each lunch. That would relieve school lunch workers of having to put food on children’s plates whether they wanted it or not. The principal agreed, and the policy was changed. Beyond that, the principle and supervisor agreed not to force children to eat food that they had taken. The mother managed to remain positive and diplomatic throughout, for which I admired her. She wanted her child to continue to participate in the school lunch program, so she knew she couldn’t alienate anyone.

CHILD CARE AND HEAD START

In chapter 3, you learned about child care and Head Start in some detail. A good Child Care Food Program or Head Start program that observes and maintains a division of responsibility in feeding can help your child grow up with respect to eating. These programs are good about exposing children to a variety of foods and work with providers to help them observe and maintain a division of responsibility in feeding. However, with staff turnovers, training difficulties, and today’s eating attitudes and behaviors being what they are, at times you may see a provider who is more controlling than trusting. Deal with it. Raise the issue with the teacher or child care provider, and if you

don't get results, talk with the nutrition coordinator or the field consultant. Workers in these programs are familiar with my concepts, and you will be able to get support in applying them.

Fat avoidance in the Child Care Food Program: Only recently, without saying much of anything to anybody else in the nutrition community, the U.S. Department of Agriculture made it the policy of the Child Care Food Program (CCFP) to restrict the fat in the diets of preschool children. For children over age 2, the CCFP manuals and cookbooks specify keeping fat to below 30 percent of total calories.

In my view, this is unnecessary and dangerous. In chapter 3, you learned my recommendations for children and fat consumption. In appendix H, "Children, Dietary Fat, and Heart Disease: You Don't Have to Panic," you can learn why I made those recommendations. It is very difficult to reduce dietary fat for children without overdoing it, and if you overdo it, children may not eat and grow well. Pennsylvania State researchers did computer modeling to calculate what day care children might eat of typical low-fat menus. They included favorite foods in their calculations and estimated child-sized portions. To lower fat in their imaginary menus, researchers used typical fat-lowering strategies: 1) They used mostly lean meats, 2) they used skim milk, 3) they used low-fat food preparation techniques, and 4) they avoided any added butter, margarine, or salad dressing.

Researchers found that it was easy to force fat intakes down too low. For the 4- and 5-year-olds, the limit was to use only one fat-lowering strategy, using skim milk, for instance, or using mainly lean meats, but not both. If more than one fat-lowering strategy was used, the percentage of fat calories fell to 20 percent or below and the children's diets were inadequate in calories and other nutrients. For the 2- and 3-year-olds, fat-lowering strategies were even riskier: using any fat restriction strategy at all made it very difficult to meet nutritional recommendations.¹²

SCHOOL NUTRITION

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is obligated to offer children a third of their daily nutritional requirements at lunchtime. Many programs offer breakfast as well. Children who can't afford to buy school breakfast or lunch are eligible for free or low-cost meals.

NSLP can help you feed your child and help you raise your healthy eater. School lunch will expose your child to foods you don't prepare at home. It can also help your child learn to eat in an institutional setting—to eat food that is not catered specifically to her likes and dislikes in a big room with lots of other people. NSLP programs and their philosophies on feeding children vary from give-them-what-they-will-eat at the one extreme to school-nutrition-as-education at the other. The first type of program makes pizza, chicken nuggets, and tacos the mainstay of the menu. The second type makes an effort to introduce children to a variety of food and helps them to increase their mastery with eating.

Some energetic and creative programs that take the educational view even provide menu bars for children and teach them to serve themselves from a variety of wholesome foods. Often these programs collaborate with teachers, who introduce children to the food in the classroom and help them gain comfort through studying, tasting, cooking, and even growing food. These programs work. Children regularly learn to like many new foods and take pleasure in their mastery.

As in child care, the best school nutrition programs are in schools that take food and nutrition seriously as an important part of the program day. In addition to teaching children about foods and exposing them to new foods, school nutrition works best when adults pass on to children their own belief that mealtime is important and their conviction that children can learn to like what is served in school lunch. By attitude, example, limit setting, and telling, adults make it clear to children that it is their responsibility to eat until they are satisfied so they can concentrate on the business of learning as well as meet their physical needs. Most important, when parents and teachers take feeding themselves seriously, children will too. When school staff and teachers eat in the cafeteria, it gives the children the message that lunchtime is important.

Of the many ways that schools support nutrition programs, one of the most important is giving children enough time to eat. In addressing the hurry and chaos of lunchrooms, some schools have realized that rushing children through to get them out to recess is part of the problem. In a Rockford, Illinois, elementary school, children who had recess first and lunch afterward settled down more, took more time

with their food, and ate better.¹⁰ Boys particularly wasted 15 percent less food when recess came before the meal. Not surprisingly, children had fewer stomachaches and less dizziness during noon recess when they ate afterward rather than before. Any teacher would expect children to perform better in afternoon classes if they had eaten better at lunchtime.

Even if the program in your child's school is a chaotic, give-them-what-they-will-eat program, your child will benefit. She will be offered nutritious food, prepared differently from the way it is prepared at home, and she will get the opportunity to learn to eat in an unfamiliar setting. I might add that it is often a challenging setting. I am amazed at how children manage to eat anything at all given the hurry and commotion that goes on in many school lunchrooms—but they do. To allow your child to be as comfortable and successful as possible, here are the features to work toward in a school nutrition program:

- Children are greeted pleasantly by lunchroom personnel.
- Adults take an interest in children and may even know their names.
- Children are given the opportunity to say “yes, please” and “no, thank you.”
- Children are not forced to take anything they don't want.
- Children are not forced to eat anything they have taken.
- The physical setting is pleasant.
- Lunchroom supervisors are pleasant and positive.
- Children are given enough time to eat.
- Children are not forced to clean their plates.

Supporting the feeding program: It is fashionable to be critical of feeding programs, and particularly of school lunch. Before you let a child hear your criticism, consider this. What would happen if you were the family cook and your spouse said to your child, “What he makes isn't very good. I don't think you should have to eat that.” I would expect that you would be absolutely burned up about it, for starters, and that your child wouldn't eat. When administrators, teachers, and parents are openly critical of the school lunch program, the same thing happens. If adults don't support each other, children lose. They don't challenge themselves to learn and grow.

School nutrition programs produce many meals with little money and a skeleton staff.

The fact that so many do it at all, let alone do it well, is nothing short of astonishing. The expectations placed on school lunch programs keep increasing, and the money available to them keeps decreasing. To make ends meet, many programs have resorted to selling what they call “a la carte” foods—brand-name tacos or pizzas or prepackaged entrées. Unlike the so-called “reimbursable meals” that have to provide a child a third of her daily nutritional requirement and add up to 30 percent fat or less, a la carte foods have to do nothing of the sort. They just have to have sales appeal for the children. Because they are familiar, higher in fat, and often carry the brand names that seems to be so important to children, they have more sales appeal than the generic offerings. Most school nutrition managers do their level best to make sure that a la carte offerings are nutritious, but that is because they care about children's nutrition, not because they are mandated to do so.

The upshot is that school nutrition programs end up competing with themselves for the child's nutritional favor. It is as if you put on a lovely meal of tuna noodle casserole and also said to your child, “Would you rather have this or would you rather we ordered out to [Your Favorite] Pizza Place for pizza?” I'll lay you odds that your child would go for the pizza rather than the casserole. When a favorite food is readily available, children don't push themselves along to learn to like the alternative. It is not good for a child to be courted or treated like a customer when it comes to food. It puts her in the adult's role of making the menu decisions and keeps her from increasing her food acceptance.

What can you do to support positive school nutrition programs? Get involved in a supportive way. Talk to the manager, not to your children. For starters, see if you can keep a la carte food out of grade schools and middle schools. Children in the early grades are still developing their food habits, and the easy availability of alternative foods limits their growth. A la carte foods are not so bad in high school, because teenagers have already developed their food habits and are figuring out ways of managing their own nutritional world. Adolescents explore and take risks, and many times they don't eat very well. That is just what they do, and beyond offering good food at predictable times, there isn't much we can do to change it. Except wait. Eventually, children go back to the

eating habits they learned when they were younger. In the meantime, don't feel you have to pander to your teenager's food preferences. If you pay for her school lunch, pay for the reimbursable meal, and if your child wants to eat from the more expensive a la carte menu, let her pay the margin herself.

Fat avoidance in the school lunch program:

The National School Lunch Program is handicapped by the U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations that mandate restriction of the fat in menus to 30 percent of calories. Always the target of public scrutiny and malcontent, the NSLP instituted the fat restriction in response to considerable public pressure. Ironically, participation in the program decreased when the fat content was reduced,³ presumably because the menus were not as appealing to the children. In the past, some programs have used way too much fat, and in those cases reductions were in order. Now the fat is often way too low. A more reasonable figure would be 35 percent, both from the point of view of appeal in eating as well as ease in cooking. However, my wishing won't make it so: the regulation is 30 percent, and for the time being we are stuck with it.

Because children are such wizards at confounding adults' attempts to control them, fat restriction at school appears not to have had much impact on children's fat intake overall. In a school lunch study in Nebraska, children in an experimental school were given low-fat, low-sodium menus. Their food intake was compared with that of children in another school that had regularly salted food with a higher fat content. Although the study was declared successful in limiting children's fat intake, to me it seemed that success was in the eye of the beholder. Children in the low-fat school ate more fat than they were scheduled to eat, children in the high-fat school ate less fat than they were served. The difference between the two schools was only 2 percent. Children in the low-fat school ate 31 percent of their calories as fat, whereas children in the high-fat school ate 33 percent. Differences in sodium weren't much to write home about either. The children in the experimental group ate 631 milligrams of sodium at lunch, whereas children in the control group ate 742 milligrams.¹¹

Another goal of the Nebraska study was to slim down fat children by feeding them less dietary fat and by keeping them more active in school physical education programs. Again, the

children were ahead of the researchers. They simply compensated at home for the changes at school. They ate more fat, exercised less, and after two years they were no fatter or thinner than when they began.⁵

Despite the negative results in the carefully conducted Nebraska study, there is still a strong conviction among child obesity specialists that school nutrition and physical education programs should be modified to control obesity. The strategies don't work, and they are potentially harmful. If children get the idea that school lunch and physical education programs are trying to repair them, they will be turned off to both.

What to Do Next

"So," you may say. "Why are you telling me all this?" Because half the battle is knowing the problem. If you know the problem, I am sure you'll figure out how to make some improvements.

"So," you may say, "what *do* you expect me to do about it?" Ah, I thought you would never ask! Do as much—or as little—as your time and interest allow. Look for opportunities in your child care setting, your child's grade school, your child's scout troop, or your PTA. Consider talking with schedule makers about timing practices and events to stay away from family dinnertime. You might talk with your child care provider or your child's teacher and give them a copy of this chapter or buy them this book. Once you and the teacher get your signals straight, you might volunteer to teach a class on nutrition.

If you have the time and energy, approach the principal, the school lunch director, the school nurse, or the school social worker. (This is a social work issue because mental health professionals are concerned about kids and eating disorders.) You can ask for help from the director of your state Nutrition Education and Training Program (NETP), a fine federally funded program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture with the mandate to sponsor and support nutrition education programs. You can activate the parent-teacher organization and make your case before the school board.

Many states have a health and wellness team called the Comprehensive School Health Program whose stated goal is not only to teach students positive health behaviors but also to

support those behaviors in the total school environment. Having nutritious food available in vending machines and at concession stands would be an example of an integrated effort that would support healthful eating. Since the national Parent Teacher Association (PTA) actively promotes the Comprehensive School Health Program, you could become involved through the PTA. I hope that whatever your avenue of involvement, you will insist on teaching children positive eating attitudes and behaviors and supporting physical self-esteem. You don't have to settle for teaching children the Food Guide Pyramid.

I'm sure you'll think of other ways to help children with their eating. Keep in mind that you don't have to go on a campaign to make a contribution. Your very *attitude* can make a difference. If you are relaxed and positive about children and their bodies, if you love good food, enjoy eating, and make feeding yourself a priority, your child and the children around you will benefit.

What is the bottom line? Children love learning about food and nutrition, but they do not benefit from being taught formulas and they do not benefit from being taught avoidance. No child ever ate according to a formula. Children eat because they enjoy it, just as their grown-ups do.

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