

Feeding The Family: Some Tips For the Cooking-Phobic

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 2 August, 2003 - 12:18

Sarah Fitz-Claridge (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>).

On the Sage Parenting [forum](http://pub3.ezboard.com/fsageparentingfrm13.showNextMessage?topicID=17.topic), Jo asked how **TCS** parents handle the possible problem of feeding the children without spending more hours than there are in the life of the universe cooking:

Sometimes children are a little more selective about what they eat. Sometimes kids don't want to eat a lot of new things. Sometimes a parent can be really frustrated because s/he worked hard preparing a meal and child refuses to try it.

I sympathise. Despite (or quite possibly because of) being a Cordon Bleu cook, I hate cooking unless I am having an interesting conversation and a glass of Vintage Krug while I do it. Given that drinking several glasses of bubbly a day is not consistent with maintaining the functional integrity of my liver or mind, or indeed, of my bank balance, cooking is clearly a hazardous activity for me. And not just because I tend to forget I am cooking and thereby cause explosions and fires. (Those who remember the particularly spectacular “September 1994” – the “Tin of Condensed Milk” explosion – are asked to keep their lips sealed.) Very dangerous. Don't try this at home. In addition, I am very busy and find it difficult at the best of times to get everything done. Life really is too short. Cooking takes a lot of time, so I tend not to cook. I don't even butter my toast: I consider that cooking. The person who said: “When compelled to cook, I produce a meal that would make a sword-swallower gag” was on to something.

I do occasionally cook, though not in my own home. **'Currently'**, we don't have a kitchen, as such. This definitely helps avoid the alarming problem of people expecting me to cook them Cordon Bleu meals, but does have disadvantages I'm sure. When I do cook, it is such an event that people send me thank-you cards through the post. It's a real special occasion. But in general, we each prepare our own meals when we feel like it. One of my children made her first hamburger before her second birthday. Young, she may have been, but when your mother is so absentminded that she forgets to feed you, you **soon learn** to cook. (I really hope that everyone reading this can spot the places where I am not entirely serious.)

For anyone who is spending too much time in the kitchen, here are my Tried and Tested Tips For a Cooking-Free Life:

1. Install a freezer the size of Europe.
2. Fill this freezer and your fridge with a wide variety of fresh or frozen single portion meals. Include gourmet (or at least edible) ones for yourself. Depending on what people in your home enjoy, include: pizzas, pizza pockets, pizza pops, anything with pizza in the name, especially if it can be cooked in the microwave and smells unbelievably bad (children seem to love those disgusting pizza poops),

good quality beefburgers, battered/breaded fillets of frozen fish, chips, steaks, chops, high-quality frozen vegetables, loaves of different sorts of bread, pitta bread, houmous, etc., etc. Variety is essential.

3. Then, instead of making endless meals and then feeling disappointed when half the family isn't around at the time they are ready, and the other half hates the meal, ensure that everyone knows that they are welcome to prepare food for themselves as and when they want to. They are happy, because they are in control of what and when they eat; you are happy because you only cook when you feel like it. Obviously, initially, or for some time in some cases, your children might well want help and advice in this respect, and of course you should help. (But taking a chicken curry out of the freezer and sticking it in the microwave for a child takes about 10 seconds, so this help is not going to feel time-consuming and onerous, even for the busiest among us.)

4. Ensure a wide variety of foodstuffs and ready meals in your pantry and fridge as well as your freezer, to maximise the chance that there will be something you each fancy eating when hunger strikes. When going to the supermarket, ask your family and guests for requests for particular foods, or leave a shopping list on the fridge for people to add items to if appropriate, and buy the foods requested. In addition to items on the shopping list, buy a wide variety of foods you know people will like as well as foods they have not tried but you think they/you might enjoy. Or take your children with you if they like visiting the supermarket and choosing what to put in the basket.

5. Make sure that the children know where everything is and what to do with it. Do they know where your pantry or other food cupboard is? If they are young, is it within reach for them? If not, change that. Do they know that the kitchen is there for you all to use, or have you inadvertently given them the impression that it is your domain and woe betide any child who steps over its threshold? Do they know how to operate the microwave? If so, maybe you could get them to give me a few tips. Do they know how to operate the oven, stove, and grill ("broiler", I think this is in American)? Do they know how to operate the barbeque? Are they aware that you have a dishwasher, and that it is the best place to store dirty crockery and cutlery (assuming that it is not being used to store clean stuff)? If you don't have a dishwasher, do they know where your sink is? Do they know which side of the sink to put dirty items on, and which is reserved for draining?

6. When the urge to cook strikes, take a valium and lie down in a darkened room. Alternatively, open the bubbly and switch on the kitchen TV or radio, or find someone to converse with while you cook. These days, the friend does not even have to be in the room: we can use the internet to audio- or video-chat with them. On second thoughts, I'll stick with audio- rather than video-chatting when cooking. People tend to laugh at my silly Cordon Bleu chef's hat.

7. When you feel like it, cook a huge (I use industrial sized heavy Le Creuset jam-making pans for this purpose) batch of something, and put single portions into freezer bags or boxes, label them and store them in the freezer. Depending upon what it is you are cooking, you can use herbs and spices and other added foodstuffs to create different dishes from one batch of food. This is my cheap version of high-quality convenience foods. Doing bulk cooking like this tends to be something of a family affair, with several individuals wanting to help, and can be great fun. N.B. This is not to be confused with "giving them leftovers". Whoever said "The most remarkable thing about my mother is that for thirty years, she served the family nothing but leftovers. The original meal has never been found." was talking about my mother, not me.

8. Be sensitive to children's desire to learn to cook. Just because you yourself hate it, that doesn't mean they will too. Some children love cooking and given half a chance and a bit of help and hand-holding initially, will gladly cook dinner for everyone. So be ready to show them how to cook if they want you to. It is an excellent investment in terms of your time as well as being the right thing to do.

Since I know that some parents are Very Concerned about the Vegetable Intake of their children, here are some tips for you:

1. Realise that there is nothing inherently unpleasant about vegetables. If you enjoy broccoli and spinach and all the delicious healthy vegetables, the chances are high that your children will grow to too. They might not enjoy spinach when

very young, because it has a very strong flavour, but they might love green beans or kale instead.

2. Try to chill out and stop worrying. If anything, your anxiety about this is likely to cause your children to develop the very aversion to vegetables you fear they may be developing.
3. Give your children the benefit of your knowledge of nutrition. Convey your theories about health and diet. Be sure that you have conveyed the information, but don't keep going on and on about it. If they have already understood, repeating yourself won't help, it will just make them switch off whenever you start talking to them about such matters. One benefit of not going on and on about these things is that when you happen to see news of some research which indicates that such-and-such a food has fantastic hitherto undiscovered anti-carcinogenic properties, they will not switch off when you tell them about it, and will thus get the benefit of this exciting new information you have.
4. We all think fresh is best, but in my case, "fresh" usually means "will sit in the fridge until rotten" owing to the fact that life is too short to prepare vegetables. So rather than forget vegetables altogether, try this fun tip: Buy bulk bags of a variety of high-quality frozen vegetables, and (while the vegetables are still frozen, of course) create single-portion bags of a number of different varieties of vegetables. Try to ensure that each vegetable in a given bag will cook in the same time as the others in the bag. Show the children how to microwave them in the bag (add a small amount of water to the bag before cooking). Very small portions of tasty-looking mixtures of vegetables look very appealing and seem gratifyingly indulgent and easy to prepare, both to you and to everyone else. I like ones with lots of colours. Others prefer the All Green variety. Children sometimes enjoy helping create the little portions, choosing which different veggies to add to each little bag.

Well, all this talk of food is making me hungry. I'm off to find something to eat.

 Taking Children Seriously

Notes

'Currently': i.e., for the last seven years. (Any kitchen fitters out there want to help change this sorry state of affairs? Do get in touch.)

High-quality convenience foods: I am mystified by the fact that I have been unable to find high quality cook-chill meals outside the UK. Is it that people in other countries eat out more?

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Comments

Also...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 2 August, 2003 - 21:56

Have a fill-up-the-fridge cooking day. This is a combination of tip 1 (fill the fridge) and tip 7 (cook big batch of stuff). Basically it means cooking the kind of stuff you buy in delicatessens yourself (ie much better and cheaper than Mr Sainsbury does them) so you can help yourself to it for the next few days/ week. Roast beef, roast barbecue chicken, roast vegetables, bacon and sausage rolls, potato/ pasta salads, etc. The other thing I recommend is a baking day, because all sorts of nice cookies, cakes, bread etc are much cheaper and nicer home-made. These freeze well, too.

Or on the other hand, go to Lidl. They now have Black Forest ham at

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Yum!

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 27 January, 2004 - 23:41

Why don't you just hand out gift certificates for McDonald's? It would be just as healthy as all the frozen stuff.

[to post comments](#)

good food.

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 26 June, 2004 - 19:26

salad is easy to prepare, my kids eat loads of lettuce and cucumber. Cut up a days portion and leave it in the fridge. corn on the cob is easy, all you have to do is boil it! cubes of cheese, sliced cold meat (we have sliced cold quorn ham flavoured). fruit is easy to, fruit cut up using a good variety appeals to kids. crackers, little sandwiches,grated carrot, boiled rice with peas and sweetcorn.A buffet type family meal is sometimes easier to do because kids can put on their plate what food they want,there is less waste and left overs can be put in the fridge to use again. I try to feed my kids food that is as fresh as possible, we also mix fresh with frozen foods to make life easier.

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In reply to the first

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 1 July, 2006 - 05:42

In reply to the first comment:

Frozen food is not necessarily lacking in nutrition. Freezing healthy meals doesn't suck all of the nutrition out of them and turn them into fast food.

[to post comments](#)

Food coercion

Submitted by Molly on 2 July, 2006 - 23:11

I used to follow tcs 4 years ago and somehow (when life and personal relationships got really difficult and demanding :) I ditched (most of) it, regrettably! Now I would like to work hard to reverse much of the damage I am sure I have caused...the one area I have the most difficulty in is food choices.

I decided to make the kids eat only raw food for 6 months, because health problems seemed to plague them when I let them choose to eat whatever they like, along with behavior problems (ADD) and bad grades in school. Grades

went up, better moods and focus, ADD seems to have disappeared, no health problems. Then with the reintroduction of some few cooked foods, more moody and unfocused and illness.

So this is my dilemma. I am absolutely certain that the improvements in concentration and moods, and health in general is a result of better functioning bodies due to eating food that was less stressful on their bodies. I am equally certain that given the choice they will choose to eat the typical diet of kids their ages (pizza, ice-cream, chicken nuggets, candy etc.)..and large amounts of these, at that, and the result will be a return of all the symptoms they had originally.

I believe that I can explain to them my theories about junk/processed food and they will still choose the garbage food...even though it makes them feel out of sorts and more irritable (assumption here based on my observation) and become just as addicted to it as they were (you can argue the addiction part if you like but that truly is what it was by all definitions)

I have not read about junk addicts in your discussion so I don't really know what the protocol is, but with my children I believe they are addicted to some (not all) of the junk food. I really don't believe that leaving them to discover or overcome that through many years of indulging is in their best interest. So do I ignore their health issues (which affect me I might add) for the sake of their emotional growth (not to grow up feeling coerced)? I do believe that a healthy body allows optimum thought processes and decision making ability. I would like to encourage the kids to experience the effects of their choices and make their own informed decisions. But just like a junkie knows that the stuff s/he is injecting is destroying his/her life/relationships and still chooses to use it, a child addicted to junk food will still need and want it even though it may upset his/her stomach or make him/her moody, and/or make him/her not be able to concentrate and all the problems these things create.

I welcome your comments.

to post comments

Extended breastfeeding minimizes my food worries

Submitted by mammal_mama on 20 January, 2007 - 18:07

I don't want to downplay the experience of anyone who notices that his children's wellbeing is affected by food choices.

But I've seen children who continuously exhibit high levels of energy and mental alertness that seem unaffected by their food choices.

I'm learning that being non-coercive in the breastfeeding relationship -- letting children nurse on cue and wean onto other foods as they desire -- greatly increases the likelihood that they'll keep on getting mother's milk for AT LEAST the first few years of their lives.

This means that even if they don't choose any fresh fruits or vegetables for a few days, they're still getting tons of really good nutrients and live enzymes through breastfeeding.

All throughout this time, if mom keeps sharing nutritional information in response to her child's interests, then by the time her child totally weans s/he'll have a wealth of food-knowledge.

This knowledge, combined with maturity and the experience s/he had of total physical, emotional, and nutritional well-being while nursing is bound to help his continue to seek the foods that will help him thrive as s/he has been

doing since day one.

Susan

to post comments

Kids Cooking with You

Submitted by OliviaB. (not verified) on 16 March, 2009 - 21:28

Having your children help you cook does help in getting them to eat it. They personalize the meal as theirs and find more satisfaction in eating it. Of course, this isn't always necessarily the case if they are forced to cook with you or there was some mistake in the middle of cooking (e.g. accidentally burning it). ----- OliviaB.

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