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** FOOD FIGHTS: (Getting veggies into the finicky family's diet)
(printable version)

FOOD FIGHTS

** *Whose kids actually eat five fruits and vegetables a day?*

By Elaine Rogers

Sure we all know about the not-so-new-anymore food pyramid and the five daily servings of fruits and vegetables everyone OUGHT to be eating, but we also know that when parents try to push the veggies, kids shove them away.

So, who's really shocked to hear that breakfast cereals are the number one source of vitamins and nutrients in American kids' diets or that fatty french fries and potato chips total a full one-third of their total vegetable servings? How about the fact that it's been nine years since the National Cancer Institute and Produce for Better Health Foundation launched a 5-a-Day campaign and began touting the cancer-fighting benefits of eating at least five daily fruit & vegetable servings, yet only 26% of American youngsters are actually achieving the goal. (Worse yet, some studies put the figure closer to 20%, while the five servings is actually a minimum recommendation, with 7-10 servings being the ideal.)



Disappointing? Yes. Surprising? Not really. I don't have to look any further than my own kids' plates to see how glaringly, alarmingly and indisputably accurate these statistics are.

As family fat-buster and culinary captain of three slender kids in a country where 50% of adults and 11% of kids are overweight, I cajole my pizza-loving, salad-hating crew to put the foreign-looking veggies to their mouths “just once” before their lips form the word “Yuck.” When those efforts fail, I camouflage little bits of fiber and beta carotene in things like spaghetti sauce and brownies and hope to pass their nutrient-nixing radar detectors undetected. Despite such sneakiness and a habit of passing out carrot sticks to my captive audience during car rides, I’ve also succumbed to a complacent “could-be-worse” attitude about what my kids are or aren’t eating. These days, I tend to think we had a “good food day” if a few apple slices were served at snacktime or, better yet, a couple of fatty food choices were avoided.

Ft. Worth mom Mika Williams agrees that fostering healthy eating habits can be “a real struggle.” With three kids aged 7, 5, and 3, she has the added challenge of dealing with food allergies and health problems which have led the family to a gluten-free, casein-free diet (no wheat or milk products) as well as restrictions of other allergens like soy, corn and rice.

“We worry more about cutting out the sugars and fats than pushing the veggies” she says. “But whether you’re on a special diet like ours or not, there are always challenges and trade-offs. . . . Sometimes you just have to make sure they’re getting their protein, offer choices and find a good vitamin supplement to feel like you’ve got it covered.”

Dallas mom Bobbie Holleman puts a similar amount of effort as well as culinary expertise into helping her husband and two teenage daughters eat well. Even so, she says the family merely “comes close” to the 5-a-day goal most days, and overall, the kids’ diets are short on “green things.” Like Williams, she counts on vitamin supplementation and makes a point offering healthy foods without pushing them.

But given what the Center of Science in the Public Interest terms today’s “toxic food environment” and a culture rife with ever-expanding opportunities to eat ever-expanding portions of high-fat, high-sugar, high calorie and low fiber foods, perhaps the real surprise here is that some of us still think we ought to be able to teach our kids how to eat right despite the fact that so many things about the foods we eat are wrong, wrong, wrong.

Fortunately, local experts claim the situation may not be as grim as moms like me might think. In fact, Dallas dietitian Jessica Setnick has a refreshingly upbeat outlook on the whole topic. Specializing in children’s nutrition, she says it’s not unusual for parents to view foods from a “good or bad perspective,” but recommends taking a closer look at the food pyramid and remembering that “everything has its place.”

“Sometimes parents fall into the trap of lecturing their kids too much, giving them the impression that all fruit is good and all candy is bad,” she says. “Psychologically, that tends to develop a less healthy outlook on food and a less positive relationship with all foods.”

Explaining that eating right is “not so much a matter of measuring nutrients as providing a lot of positive encounters with fruits and vegetables,” Setnick says: “What you want is to help kids develop a healthy relationship with food and a healthy concept of eating.”

Hope, then, may actually come in the form of a parental attitude adjustment, i.e. worrying less about lightening up the menu and more about lightening up the conflict.

“Parents are often surprised when they complain to me that their kids only like their vegetables covered in butter or served with high-fat dips, and I respond with the word ‘Terrific,’” Setnick says. “But, at least they’re eating those veggies and having positive experiences with them.”

“Eventually, their taste buds will change as they get older,” she adds. “Then they can cut back on the fat. But the main thing now is for kids to learn that everything has its place in the diet, and certainly, to make fruits and vegetables a big part of it.”

Ft. Worth dietitian Carol Williams (no relation to Mika) concurs, adding that the parental goal of helping kids make healthier food choices shouldn’t become a battle that’s waged at every meal.

“Stressing fruits and vegetables is important because it gets away from the empty calories of fats and sugars,” she explains, “But we shouldn’t go about it by saying things like, ‘You can’t have dessert if you don’t eat your vegetables.’” Tagging this type of threat a common error of ‘the clean plate club,’ she adds: “It’s a mentality a lot of parents grew up with, but it tends to make mealtimes miserable for everybody and it gives kids the wrong message about food.”

Likewise, “portion distortion” is something Williams says she sees a lot of in her job with the department of clinical nutrition at Cook Children’s Medical Center in Fort Worth: “It’s a fact that parent often overfeed their children,” she says. “They fill up their plates because the kid portions look so small on a full-sized plate; then they get mad when kids don’t eat what they were served.”

The solution? “Use smaller plates,” Williams says. “I know it sounds simple, but parents are always amazed when they do this. It gives them a more realistic view of how much their kids are actually eating.”

Setnick adds that it’s fine to teach kids that “certain foods have more nutrition than others,” but warns against dishing it out too much. “If you push it too much, you’ll probably get more resistance than you might have otherwise,” she explains. “Kids start to think, ‘Mom’s always trying to shove carrots at me when what I really want is a Snickers.’ Eventually, they’ll just start sneaking in their candy bars when they’re away from home.”

A better strategy is to offer both: grapes with the chocolate chip cookies, and bite-sized candy bars on the same plate with the celery sticks.

For the long run, experts say healthy eating should be viewed more as a general goal and a way of life rather than a daily source of stress for parents. And what good news that is! Meanwhile, most nutritional authorities are shying away from the gram- and calorie-counting techniques of old. “Now the goal should be to look at all your plate and make sure it’s a balanced picture,” Williams explains.

In more good news, Williams says the chore of measuring servings doesn’t have to be a complex process or a mathematical nightmare. Basically, one-half cup canned fruit, 3/4 cup of juice (a 100% brand, not the sugary juice drinks), one medium piece of fruit, 1/4 cup cooked vegetables or 1/2 cup raw vegetables each constitute single servings for kids aged 6-12. After that, the portions increase slightly to adult-sized portions. And as far as those veggies hidden in the sauce or jelly on the sandwich, we might just think of them as bonus offerings.

“The important thing is to provide a wide variety of foods and a pleasant mealtime environment,” Setnick says. “Then, it’s the kids’ responsibility to make their choices.”

Experts and nutrition-minded moms tend to agree that offering variety and choices are the mainstays of successfully marketing healthy foods to reluctant young audiences. “If you offer them five vegetables, most kids will find at least one that they like,” says Mika Williams, the mother with the added challenge of keeping her kids on a gluten-free, casein-free diet.

As for enhancing the nutritional content of food, otherwise known as camouflaging the veggies, it appears to be both an acceptable and common practice. (Like nagging, we might just rank it in the parent’s prerogative column.) Particularly inspirational in this area is Bobbie Holleman who has been known to serve up banana crepes with whipped cream for breakfast, supplements pizza night fare with minced squash and slivered spinach, makes a mean eggplant lasagne and even hides sweet potatoes in the chipotle chicken sauce. Meanwhile, Williams says her three kids love her mashed potatoes with the hidden dose of cauliflower, and both moms thought my carrots-in-the-brownies trick was something they might try.

Of course, these types of effort often require advance preparation as well as good timing, so experts say busy parents shouldn’t berate themselves on the days when healthy eating takes a backseat to an on-the-go schedule.

“Nutrition is more a matter of what you eat over the course of a week or a month rather than what you have at one meal,” Setnick says, “So kids shouldn’t feel guilty about having that hamburger at school. ...As long as parents are regularly shopping in the produce department of their local grocery store and serving up fruits and vegetables found there, you’re probably doing okay.”

Sidebar:

You Expect Me To Eat That Green Stuff?

Keeping kids in carrots and fostering healthy eating habits is tough in a culture where dashboard dining is de rigueur and kids’ preferences for junk food and fatty entrees are perpetuated by unenlightened school lunch programs, the fast-food industry and a plethora of products with little or no redeeming food value.

But experts say it can be done. Here are some tips to help make fruits and vegetables a welcome part of a finicky family’s diet:

**** Serve new foods along with old favorites rather than alone.** Timing the introduction at the start of a meal when the kids are more likely to be hungry is a good strategy as well.

**** Don’t take food rejections personally** and, in fact, be prepared for it to take several or even numerous “exposures” before a child considers trying a new food offering. And don’t be surprised if a youngster samples something at a friend’s house which he repeatedly rejected when it was offered at home. “That is something that happens all the time,” Setnick laughs. “It’s just the way kids are.”

**** Be creative and persistent.** Two very big challenges for both on-the-go families and parents of finicky eaters. It's easy to fall into a routine of only preparing things you know your kids like, Williams says, but the gentle persuasion of persistence tends to pay off over time.

**** Serve fruits and veggies in kid-friendly formats.** Experts say kids tend to like foods that are brightly-colored and crunchy, and cutting them into interesting shapes or presenting them in playful ways can take the groan out of eating one's greens. Setnick says broccoli served with melted cheese and homemade banana bread stuffed into lunchboxes are "terrific options" for making those healthy foods popular favorites.

**** Involve kids in food preparation.** Williams says they're more likely to try something new if they've been involved in the process of preparing it. Likewise, moms who garden and grow their own herbs or vegetables say interest in greenery is especially high when kids participate in the planting, nurturing and picking of edible plants and their fruit.

****Think more about what you're putting ON the menu and less about what you'd like to take OFF.** Setnick says it's simply a matter of emphasizing the positive, and Williams adds the reminder that kids do need more fat in their diets than grown-ups because their bodies are still growing and they tend to be more active.

**** Don't instigate food fights.** Shaming kids into trying new things or withholding dessert until they've eaten their broccoli is a lose-lose situation, Williams says. And even if encouraging healthier eating feels like a battle to parents,

Don't elevate treats to a forbidden pleasure. Setnick recommends serving kids their beloved candies right alongside mom's favorite healthy snacks so kids don't get the sense of being denied and start eating their chocolate "on the sly."

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