



## The Truth and Consequences of Eating

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This is a follow up conversation to the discussions we've had about food at the four, six, nine and twelve month well baby office visits. With the passing of time and aging of the baby, some things get easier, others get harder with most children. Today we're thinking only about the variety of eating and its potential impact on "lifetime" eating preferences and health.

Many of you have and should be congratulated for emphasizing the making and eating of a wide array of vegetables and fruits over the first year. Remembering what the author Michael Pollan said about healthy eating. "Eat mostly plants." A simple phrase, but one that so completely defines the goal of health maintenance via eating.

The baby is gone now and has been replaced by a child. Not just any child, but a toddler and then a preschooler. Hopefully, yours is willful and stubborn and willing to "go to the mat" to accomplish a goal. These behaviors, when well channeled, as a child, adolescent, and adult, can be important for future accomplishments. So be happy your toddler is willful and stubborn for the future, but beware of the present and the impact it is liable to have on eating behavior.

Sooner or later many toddlers will begin to shun vegetables and to a lesser extent fruits (sugar is a "motivator"). They use various techniques like simple avoidance, pushing aside food or the more demonstrative (remember to be "happy", for great accomplishment lies ahead) will drop food onto the floor or throw food, even sometimes at you. How you respond to this challenge will help to determine how the future eating of vegetables and fruits will be defined in your toddler's life.

So now it's time for "truth **and** consequences." The truth is that the vegetables and fruits are essential great nutrients and the **consequences** are that if your toddler chooses not to eat what has been served, hunger should be the "reward". Sounds so easy. Hunger is not to be avoided. Everybody gets hungry and it's OK. Hunger is a great motivator, exceeded in the human experience only by the will to breathe and the quenching of thirst. Without hunger, eating would be a complete "drag". So rejoice about being hungry!!



It's such a great motivator, such a behavior modifier, such a source of joy when you are actually eating. Your job is to use this great tool to channel the behavior of your child and begin to sculpt the "palatal preferences" that can last a lifetime.

Still, it sounds so easy. As with many things, the "devil is in the details". So let's start to talk about the details. Remember Michael Pollan and the "Eat mostly plants." If that is, as it should be, the goal, then you have to serve mostly plants or you've lost before you've begun. If shunning the plants served doesn't "spell hunger", you're not serving enough and once again you've lost before you've begun. Serve lots of plant choices at each meal so the toddler has choices at every level of the mealtime (to eat or not to eat) and then tell the **truth**. "This (and only this) is your meal". When avoidance behavior begins, you need to be prepared to let that toddler who was told the **truth, have the consequences**. Offer more of the vegetables being shunned. Allow the next snack to be **only** the vegetables being shunned. Let them eat off the floor before the dog does. Let them be hungry to the next meal. The further down this list you go, the greater the impact and the more certain you are to develop a toddler response marked by the frustration so expert in most toddlers. Better have your game face on. These barely verbal humans are expert in preverbal communication because in their experience thus far, this is how they've "gotten it done". Their "facial recognition software" is better developed than yours and if you don't have your "game face" on, you'll get read in an instant. It does not matter if managing this contest is killing you. That toddler cannot see that or the battle for supremacy in this area will go on indefinitely. Actions speak louder than words. Quit trying to have a lengthy persuasive conversation with a toddler!!!! A brief explanation to reiterate the **truth** and then perform an action that adheres to that truth. Be dispassionate. Never be angry, but be unwaveringly consistent in your expectations. Remember that willful toddler is working on the skills that will build personal excellence in the future and it's your responsibility to be there to help. You do this all day long (or should) in so many other areas. This one area is special though. The perk here is that you're building that toddler a longer lifetime through healthy eating so there will be enough time and vitality as an adult to fulfill "the destiny".

Consistency is the key. It cannot be just your consistency. The nuclear family and the extended family all need to be managing this in the same way or uncertainty about choices and expectations will be the result. That uncertainty is complex. It creates scenarios where that child, who much of the time wants to please you, but is presented a situation where the response you're trying to cultivate, is uncertain. You'd be anxious as an adult trying to sort through complex choices all the time. Imagine what this does to the



toddler. Quit kidding yourself. Daily life, especially for children is improved by consistency in every arena. A thoughtful family will support this effort. It's not "cute" when they don't support your efforts.

If you have a child in day care and you're lucky enough that the table fare includes a large portion of plants, you may wonder why plant consumption is so much better at daycare than at home. Why do they nap better on a mat at school than a bed at home? Toilet train sooner at school than home? Pick up toys at school more than at home? Whine less at school than at home? It's about expectations and consistency. **Truth and consequences** so to speak. Tell that toddler the truth and let there be appropriate, honest and consistent consequences and you'll be rewarded by the behavior you're seeking from a genuinely happier toddler. Happier because the expectations are defined and the complex choices are minimized.

If you have a slightly older child who for any reason, has slipped off or never was on the "plant eating wagon", there will need to be some nutritional catch up work done. This will likely be met with more strife than if good habits have been in place all along. The same techniques noted above will work, but the strife is likely to be more strident. Embrace the contest and be consistent because decades of your children's adult health likely hang in the balance. Children who eat few or no vegetables are often a reflection of the surrounding family. This issue will need to be successfully tackled first or no legitimate change will occur. Actions speak louder than words and child vegetable consumption can only occur if the parents purchase, prepare and eat with gusto, large quantities of plants in their homes.

If you want to support healthy snacking, you cannot have a house full of junk food. If you're frustrated about the battle over snacks in your home and you wonder who's to blame, go look in the mirror. The toddler isn't driving to the grocery store. You should get to a point where you have only healthy snack choices and let the children choose among them. Choosing among good choices is essential practice for children and can, as they age, be part of evolving autonomy. With repetition, most will eventually be able to make good choices even when bad choice options are included. If you've trained the palatal preferences properly, this really can happen. This is not very American and it sounds easier than it is because it likely will require changing a lifetime of parent snacking behavior. Go look in the mirror and find the enabler. You can do better. Junk food, if you're wondering, is the "stuff in plastic" in the pantry or fridge that can sit there for weeks and months and when you eat it, it doesn't kill you on the spot. It will kill you, but the death is a slower and more protracted thing.



Build a shopping list for meal foods and snack foods that does not include junk food. Have your meal menus in mind and purchase to enable those menus. Do this when you're full and the process will go better for you. Most people don't put the "junk" on the list, so **never purchase off the list items** and you might just win this American battle. Remove spontaneity at all costs at the grocery. Even if this means you have to develop a new list for forgotten items while you're grocery shopping and go back the next day to purchase them. **Never** cheat on the list or you're just another cheater and all will likely be lost.

The grocery hires a lot of marketing expertise to manipulate you. You'd better have a strategy or you're going to lose. They market to your children as well! So if you cannot manage yourself at the grocery, don't add the complexities of your children to this brewing disaster. Honestly though, you have to manage yourself because you need to take the kids and teach "grocery store management 101" to them so they can protect themselves as they grow up and leave the home. If you do this well, the kids can be allies at the grocery and have a heightened sense of participation in healthy menu planning, selected purchasing to fulfill that menu and you'll have one more learned behavior in your children that will help to ensure that they will have food behaviors that are not so typically American.

Learn to manage a kitchen if you don't know how. Find the time savers at the grocery, online and in your weekly schedule that can minimize the investment of time and energy and allow you, despite the competition for your time, to put quality meals on the table that include mostly plants. It can be done, and though this work may seem mundane, your best creative genius in time management and food preparation can bear enormous fruit. Develop a plan. Create your menus. Purchase accordingly. Get the family involved. America has a health crisis and if you don't want to be part of it, you cannot plan, purchase and consume like an American. At the end of the day, you'll save money, be healthier, and so will the kids. However, if you are hoping the children will thank you for this life extending effort, be prepared to wait until they have that willful toddler of their very own. When the thanks come, remember your youth and smile because the grandchild is winning.

One last topic to discuss perhaps is our love affair with restaurants, fast food, and take-in foods. There are some choices "off the rack" that offer table fare that emphasizes plants. In any community of size, they are a handful at best. For all the rest, you'll need a strategy or this will be a plant sparing nutritional minefield. Restaurants are often online with menus, so you can see options, develop a game plan to emphasize plants



and avoid altogether those where it just isn't possible. Mostly, these strategies will be main course sharing (too large a portion anyway) and buying lots of veggies on the side to create a proper plant template. The free bread and chips that are often given you, give back! Take-in food comes from restaurants and grocery stores. The latter offers generally a wider array of plants to fill out the meal and in many situations

can now be delivered. Either way, be thoughtful, buy plants aplenty and a winning meal can be on the table in minutes with little planning. Start the water boiling, turn on the oven and all the rest while the delivery is in progress. Set the table and in minutes, you can be seated. Use your imagination and find a better way to eat.

The willful toddler is depending on you.....