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Do not despair – even fussy eaters will relish good food, eventually

Is there a right way to deal with the turned-up noses and the battles at mealtimes?

RESTAURATEURS UNDOUBTEDLY dread the arrival of their nemesis, the notoriously exacting food critic who sits in imperious judgment of every morsel that leaves their kitchen. However, as any parent will tell you, even the most querulous and picky reviewer will seem positively tolerant and accommodating when compared with the dismissive response of your child when presented with your culinary best. These turned-up little noses and pushed-away plates can be difficult to cope with.

That sinking feeling is compounded by the weight of responsibility a parent feels for the health and wellbeing of their charge. After all, Gordon Ramsey may wish for the critics to enjoy his concoctions but is likely to be unconcerned as to whether they are getting their full complement of vitamins and minerals and their five a day.

It's reassuring to realise that we are not alone in our anxiety. Doyenne of the family kitchen and childhood nutrition expert, Annabel Karmel, confirms that "90 per cent of children go through at least one lengthy stage of being fussy". In her excellent *Fussy Eaters Recipe Book* (Ebury Press, 2007) she quotes research confirming that "nearly 50 per cent of parents said food is their children's worst area of fussiness, coming well ahead of clothes and even their hairstyles".

Knowing that your child is not the only hard-to-please little tyke in the world is comforting but that doesn't take away the sense of dread that hits you every time you serve up your latest concealed vegetable delight. A survey of 1,000 beleaguered mothers, undertaken by 72 Point on behalf of Hovis in the UK, found that 25 per cent of mothers actively dread mealtimes.

They don't simply struggle to get their children to eat a healthy balanced diet; they often struggle to get them to eat anything at all. In fact, 42 per cent admitted that they simply allow their kids to eat whatever they like.

Tactics vary. Half resort to bribery while more than two-thirds admit to hiding the healthy stuff in along with the nuggets and pasta. Almost all believe that they are not as strict as their own mums were and are certainly more willing to let their children leave the table without clearing their plates.

Is all of this guilt misplaced? Should we relax more and strive to make mealtimes a happy experience for all concerned? Can we trust our children to take the nutrition they need if we restrict ourselves to simply serving it up, leaving them to their own devices and leading by example by clearing our own plates? Is this undoubtedly desirable ambition a workable one?

Essentially, the answer is yes, although we cannot abdicate responsibility completely. Nutrition expert Ellyn Satter's philosophy is: "The parent is responsible for what, when and where. The child is responsible for how much and whether."

Even the fussiest of eaters will eventually revert to the good habits that they most likely developed as a baby, but in their own time and on their own terms. We have to learn to trust them.

Naturally there's no harm in encouraging healthy eating and making mealtimes less stressful. Experts agree that inspiring them with your own healthy behaviour is imperative – we can't ask children to do as we say, not do as we do.

Also, involving your children in food preparation and allowing them to take some credit for the family meal rather than treating them as passive recipients of your menu choices is a very effective way of engaging them in the process.

Sitting down to regular family meals is a laudable, but perhaps unrealistic, ambition in these highly pressurised times. Many children are grazers. They will arrive in hungry and head for the cupboard to find a snack. You have control over what they'll find there.

All too often the dining table becomes a battleground. Food can become a source of



conflict and once this happens appetites evaporate. Children have to be trusted to decide if they are hungry, what they will choose to eat from the food on offer, and when they have had enough.

My sister tells a salutatory tale of one lunchtime when her little boy was anxious to head out for a promised play date. As she tried to eat he hovered and harangued. "Come on mum! Aren't you finished yet? Eat up!"

Realising that this was precisely how she behaved when the tables were turned and how utterly impossible it is to enjoy a meal when subjected to such an assault she vowed to put up and shut up in future.



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