

Food Fights

WINNING THE NUTRITIONAL CHALLENGES OF PARENTHOOD
ARMED WITH INSIGHT, HUMOR, AND A BOTTLE OF KETCHUP

Laura A. Jana, MD, FAAP

Jennifer Shu, MD, FAAP

American Academy of Pediatrics

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CHAPTER 1

food for thought

Why Food Fights?

We called this book *Food Fights* for several reasons. First it was because we needed a catchy title to get your attention and, by the looks of it, we're off to a good start. The book is also called *Food Fights* because we hoped that the thought of a good old-fashioned food fight à la *Animal House* would be enough to make you smile, and the promise of a discussion of ketchup might be enough to make you both chuckle and breathe a knowing sigh of relief that we can relate to the *real* nutritional challenges of parenthood. But more fundamentally, it's because it is impossible to ignore the fact that food-related battles rank right at the top of the daily list of parental challenges, and they are being waged in virtually every household in America. Our children's nutritional fortitude is at risk and, as both pediatricians and parents, we decided it was high time to march to the front lines and mediate.

If you have ever asked yourself just how you are supposed to apply all of the latest dietary directives to your family's everyday life when your child recoils at the slightest hint of something green on her plate and you have a hard time even figuring out how to get dinner on the table in the first place, then this is definitely the book for you. If not, we can all but guarantee that you are still going to find plenty of tidbits of helpful advice that will serve you well. We are convinced that by giving you a bird's-eye view of what you're up against and arming you with some basic insights along with some palatable peacekeeping strategies, you

can win the nutritional challenges of parenthood and play a defining role in shaping your child's lifelong eating habits. In order to do so, we felt it was important first to give you a big-picture perspective on the current state of affairs.

Under Siege

As parents today we are faced with raising our children in a veritable minefield of dietary trappings and hazardous temptations. Finding them is not a matter of searching, but simply of opening our eyes to their presence in our children's everyday diets, not to mention our own. Over the past 2 decades, fast food meals increased from less than 10% to nearly a quarter of all meals consumed. Over this same time span, the percentage of total energy intake from either soda or juice increased nearly 100%, and salty snack intake doubled. Even bagels have been super-sized such that they contain at least 200 calories more than they did 20 years ago. Not surprisingly, the proportion of obese Americans has continued to increase as well.

Regardless of how you weigh the facts, it is impossible to look past the estimated 30% of adults older than 20 years (that's roughly 60 million people) who are now considered to be obese. At the same time, we know that children with obese parents are as much as 80% more likely to become obese themselves. These numbers confirm what we should have seen coming: An estimated 1 in 5 of our country's children have already followed in their parents' footsteps. Also hard to ignore are the clear health implications of poor nutrition, overweight, and obesity—including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, eating disorders, and stroke, to name but a few. Despite ambitious goals for our country's collective weight reduction by the year 2010, things seem to be getting worse, not better.

So why tackle the huge problem of adult obesity in a book about teaching kids healthy eating habits? We hope the answer to this question is as obvious to you as it is to us: Because it's impossible to separate

the two. While we had every intention of focusing our attention on the questions parents typically ask that are specific to their kids, we constantly found ourselves discussing eating habits in general. After all, if we as parents can't get our own eating habits and waistlines under control, how is it that we think we will be able to teach our children to do so? Bottom line: Our children stand to take after us in more ways than one, and when it comes to being overweight, they are already scrambling up the growth curves (at least for weight) in record numbers.



Weighing the Facts



Since 1980 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the number of overweight kids in America has more than tripled. Recent estimates suggest that 9 million children and teens between the ages of 6 and 19 are considered to be overweight.

So there you have it—a big-picture view of the battlefield. If that's all there was, it would be a very sobering sight indeed. Yet we are optimistic. If we weren't convinced there are things that each of us can do in our day-to-day approach to feeding our children that will help them steer clear of trouble and come out ahead, we wouldn't have bothered to write this book. Instead of throwing up our hands in surrender, we decided to take a closer look at what parents can do to prevent their children—and hopefully themselves—from becoming another statistic in this battle of increasing proportions.

Looking Beyond the Substance at Hand

As much as this now seems like it's going to be yet another book on the subject of childhood nutrition, it's not. Well, not exactly anyway. While we fully intend to provide you with a reality-based approach to your children's nutritional needs and offer plenty of practical information for you to use as you whip up everything from your baby's first foods to your family's meals, this book is first and foremost about teaching, learning, behavior, and development. Because it really doesn't matter

if you have a medical degree, a PhD in nutrition, or the best parental intentions in the world if you can't get your child to agree to the rules of engagement—get him to consider giving up his bedtime bottle, eat his peas, sit for a meal, or open his mouth and try new foods. Unlike so many of the nutrition books out there, this book is therefore as much about applying tried-and-true parenting skills as it is about the actual food. And while it may seem that in the end *Food Fights* is all about winning and losing, our real goal is to minimize food-related conflicts and take the fight out of food.

Staying Away From Slippery Slopes

Part of the problem with parenthood is that nobody ever tells you just exactly on which day a nutritional necessity such as middle-of-the-night feedings or a bedtime bottle suddenly becomes a bad habit in the making. That's because as with most routines, using food for comfort and other such "food fights" ease themselves into existence while we're too busy going about our parenting business to notice. And while we don't presume to be able to give you an exact timetable of when to stop certain routines before they become ingrained, we intend to discuss many of the predictable slippery slopes of sustenance-turned-habit.

Whetting Your Child's Appetite

We recently heard a comment that stuck with us like gum on a shoe: "It's one thing to place good food in front of your child, but it's altogether another to place the appetite for good food in your child's mind." We couldn't agree more. In fact, this astute observation serves as the underpinning for a good portion of what we aim to accomplish with *Food Fights*. While there are plenty of books that will promise you recipes for success and others that put lists of recommended vitamins and minerals at your fingertips, we hope instead to whet your appetite and empower you to establish an approach to teaching your children healthy eating patterns.

We strongly recommend you think of your role this way: You're planting the seeds of your child's future success. And as you may have already discovered, teaching children healthy habits doesn't happen overnight, and it's certainly not a one-shot deal. As with just about all tasks that involve nurturing children, you don't just go and plant seeds, take the time to water them, and then get frustrated the next day because there are no plants to show for your efforts. When it comes to modifying your child's behavior, be aware that it takes time and requires cultivation. Although we intend to help guide you down a path of nutritional (and behavioral) enlightenment, we guarantee that it will be a path with its requisite share of cookie crumbs and spilt milk.

Setting the Table = Setting the Stage

It's next to impossible to discuss children's eating habits and nutritional status without taking into account several other factors. Not only do behavior and development play a key role in determining what your child is willing and/or able to accomplish at any given time, but your family's lifestyle stands to be a major influence. As we put together the advice we wanted to offer you in *Food Fights*, we kept wandering away from the table and confronting the entire "stage" of everyday life—everything from fast food to television, from work/life issues to hectic lifestyles.

Let's face it, being a parent today can be a bit tricky, and our goal is to point out how some of today's lifestyle challenges stand to impact your family's eating habits. We'll leave it to you to decide what, if anything, you want to change. And lest you start feeling pangs of guilt before you have even passed the introduction portion of the book, please realize that we do not mean to sit in judgment. Let us be the first to admit that our own schedules don't always allow for family-style meals, that keeping pace with the many demands of parenthood often means that our refrigerators sit empty, our kitchens go underused, and the waitstaff at some of the more family-friendly local restaurants know us by name.

A Call to Action

Despite the fact that we have high hopes for putting an end to many of the unnecessary food fights of everyday parenthood, let it be known that we do not believe in force-feeding you a rigid set of rules any more than we believe in force-feeding children. Instead, our call to action is to arm you with the information and inspiration you need to get started. By giving you realistic ways of putting nutritional guidelines into practice, our *Food Fights* plan of attack is designed specifically to help you keep your high chairs, family gatherings, and kitchen tables from turning into nutritional battlefields. We have yet to find a parent who wasn't grateful for a battle plan for winning the nutritional challenges of parenthood, and so we forged ahead and focused our efforts on creating just that.