

HOW TO RAISE AN EATER

Posted on November 13, 2013 by



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My mum often tells this story. When my brother and I were about two and a half and 5 years old respectively we had gone to a farm called Kopa a few hours from Bangalore. A few parents with kids had decided to go, all the kids were in the same age range. At meal times both my brother and I used to whiz through our meals and then ask our mother if we could get up now and go. The remaining mothers were bribing, cajoling, dancing, and singing to get their kids to eat. They asked my mum to send us to their homes for stay overs so their kids could learn from us.

To have my child sit around for hours on a dining table was a no no for me. I don't have the patience and I do know that it's instinctive to eat when hungry. No child (or person) will starve when there is food around, unless of course the child is not well and is trying to communicate that by avoiding food.

On a recent trip with some friends who had a three year old, I witnessed this scene: The girl required a distraction to eat namely the laptop or the ipad. (A lot of toddlers and children I've met only eat when watching tv). When you do this, the child is not paying attention to the food at all but is eating mechanically. She may continue eating when full because she is so engrossed in the program and food is being spoon fed. At times when she didn't want to eat she was cajoled and offered other foods (would you like a cheese sandwich instead?). While she was eating N came to the table, ate about 8 bites before he started fussing, at which point the husband or me slightly coaxed him by either singing or making funny faces for 2-3 minutes after which the meal was over whether he ate half or less or more.

N is over the 100 percentile range for weight and height for his age.

Here are my two bits on how to raise an eater:

- 1) **Trust their instincts:** babies are born with instincts. If you don't believe me, watch this [video](#). So when they are full they will stop eating. By forcing them to eat more we're forcing our children to stop trusting their bodies and develop a less natural relationship with food. For example by bribing them with food as rewards, food is no longer for nourishment but for pleasure.
- 2) **Breastfeed:** a breastfed baby tastes different foods right from the very beginning. He is already open to try new things.
- 3) **Start solids at 6 months:** when you do this, you do NOT have to give the child very liquidy foods. I started with course solid foods and not with extra mashed or strained foods. So by the time he was 10 months he was eating exactly the same food as we do because he didn't waste any time moving onto bigger pieces of food.
- 4) **DO NOT FORCE:** It's my genuine belief that forcing and cajoling is where the problem lies. When N was about 11 months I saw a mother of a baby the same age literally force-feeding her son. She had some liquidy mush in some sort of tube like thing which if you squeeze it comes out on a spoon. (I could never use that, as I never gave such mushy food even in the first solids session). Then she

pinched the baby's cheeks inwards in such a way that the mouth opened in an 'O'. Then she forced the spoon in again and again. Finally the father and she held the child down while forcing food down while he struggled. I don't know about you, but if I had food shoved down my throat I'd definitely have a unhealthy relationship with food.

Why why why are children forced to eat? They will not starve! They are more instinctual than you and me, why ruin that so early? Spending half an hour or more cajoling a child to eat is also futile because if hungry the baby will eat. It's survival after all.

5) **Don't offer a substitute.** If a baby has not eaten his meal, he is probably not hungry. There is no reason to offer a yummy but nutrient deficient substitute for the meal. A toddler on the other hand knows he will get a bribe of something else if he doesn't eat and will not eat his vegetables if you have started offering junk from a young age. I only give N nutrient rich foods, in his meals. He has no choice but to eat it or else he will go hungry.

6) **Go for quality over quantity.** If you are offering nutrient rich foods at every meal, it will be heavy. Eggs are heavy as compared to choccos. So N races through his eggs for breakfast and is not hungry from 9 to 1, which is when he eats lunch. He doesn't eat bread or any foods that will make him hungry quick.

7) **Don't give food in between meals.** At the play ground a little girl a few months older than N comes to play. Her nanny is CONSTANTLY feeding her in the hour and a half that she is playing. She gives her small biscuits and complains that she doesn't eat her meals. How? Will that tiny little thing eat meals if she is constantly eating biscuits all day? When N comes back from the playground he is HUNGRY. He eats his dinner quickly and happily.

8) **Let them eat steak:** Experiment with all textures. N ate steak at 8 months. I just gave him a tiny piece, which he chewed on with his gums for almost 5 minutes before I removed it from his mouth. Experimenting with textures from early on will lead to a child who is not fussy.

9) **Worry less:** If you're not constantly worried about the food they're eating, you like me will let your baby eat anything and everything. I can go out for lunches and order off the menu for N. it makes my life a whole lot easier!

So far these techniques have worked for me. I don't worry too much when N eats less for his meals. If he fussed or acts up I simply end the meal and don't bother offering anything else. Since I am still breastfeeding I know he is getting everything he needs though I can tell that his dependence on my milk is diminishing fast. Now I am not sure how much of it is nutritive sucking if at all.

Trusting your babies instincts and yours is the best way to stay worry free and not force the little one.

Thanks for reading. Have you tried these and still turned out with a fussy eater? Let me know in the comments.

