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The Child Who Will Not Eat

By Lorraine Sandstrom, Child Development Department

Some of the hardest and yet most common questions which mothers ask all over the world are those connected with a child's eating habits. Why does my child refuse to eat? How can I make him eat what is good for him? How soon would he starve if I did not force him to eat? These questions are constantly arising in the homemaker's world.

The child in question is nearly always thin and overactive. He sometimes looks sick and will not gain in weight. He is what we often call "nervous." His cheeks are sallow and colorless. He is easily fatigued, but finds it difficult to rest. He comes reluctantly to the table. In general, he refuses to eat the food which is set before him.

Eating habits are a matter of training. These habits begin when the child's life begins. Why, then, shouldn't training begin there? Instinct makes the child hungry, but only training can give him the right kind of appetite. Taking for granted that he is free from any real idiosyncrasies and glandular disturbances, there is nothing left in the way of physiological preparedness, but wholesome living. This means that he must have active exercise with sufficient rest between times. Perhaps he should take a nap or rest in the morning as well as in the afternoon. Perhaps he should be in school for only a half-day session. He may need ten minutes of quiet rest before he goes to his meal. By all means he should have regularity of bed-time hours. Going to bed should be preceded by quiet and restful play, so that there is no stimulation after the evening meal.

Sometimes children become tired while sitting at the table. There is one little two-year-old boy who begins eating enthusiastically as soon as he is seated. After ten minutes, and before he is half thru, he will start dropping his silverware, wiggling in his chair, and will seem disinterested in any food, no matter if it be his favorite kind.

In this case, it is wise to help him by feeding him a few spoonfuls, and not expecting him to do all of it by himself. "Spooning up my soup," as one little boy said, can become very tiresome. Here the adult can help and be justified in doing so. It is well to manage, however, that the child takes the last spoonful himself, since he then feels that the finishing-up job was his own.

Some children are not given enough sunshine throughout the winter months. Even sunlight in summer is often poorly utilized. If all mothers knew how important is sunlight in encouraging hunger, more little bodies would be copper-colored by the time winter comes around again.

The food, itself, must be dietetically correct. The amount must be sufficient to build the body and to repair tissues. The proportion of fat, carbohydrates and proteins must be balanced. Water, minerals and vitamins play an important part, too. The methods of preparation, attractiveness of serving, variation and color must also be considered. This does not mean, however, that food has to be dressed up, or camouflaged in any way. Simplicity in serving, with as much of the real flavor left in it as possible, is more advisable than the method so often used of doctoring the food to suit someone's particular fancy. Children do not like games, either. Playing games at the table may seem interesting at first, but it is soon learned that these are only schemes to entice eating of objectionable food. When the child has to go thru dramatizations to the point of turning himself into a papa bear in order to eat the porridge, the porridge might just as well be fed to the real bear, as far as training for good food habits is concerned.

Children are great imitators. If father will not eat liver or carrots and announces the fact in the child's presence, what can one expect but that the child will refuse that food, also?

Some parents delight in talking about their food dislikes, about the children's dislikes, and about other dislikes at the table. What could be worse than to have any meal companion constantly talking (continued on page 14)
WAITERS, NOT DISHES, GET THE BREAKS

In the line of institutional improvements, how is this? The waiter who, with his tray on his shoulder and his heart in his mouth, used to stave his way back and forth thru the swinging doors of the service pantry, no longer performs his little two-step when the door opens in his face. Let us present the automatic door opener! As the waiter approaches the door he interrupts a small beam of light, which gets instant results from the door. There follows an immediate “open sesame,” the entrance of the waiter and the silent closing of the obliging door.

SPINACH AND AMERICANIZATION

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His eyes are dark and piercing, his beard is long and grey and his carriage erect. Soon the mother, late from Bagdad, came into the room. She had just come in from shopping and still wore a shawl over her head. Catherine, the three-year-old child, peeked at me from under the table. It is interesting to see little mahogany tinted Nareissa and small, ear-ringed Antoinette Sansome play happily together with a doll. It is, if you please, a melting pot where much interest, their children. It is interesting to see one man - two-step when the door opens in his face.

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(from page 10)

about this and that which disagrees with him? If we cannot have cheerfulness and geniality at the table, we cannot expect anything but poor food habits to develop.

Some parents coax and beg the child to eat. They make him feel that he must eat the spinach because he is Daddy’s big boy, or because the canary in the cage will sing a little louder. This kind of fussing discourages the interest in food. Perhaps it would be well to respect a child’s opinions by letting him have at least one food he does not have to eat. Often his interest is centered on playing for adult attention. He enjoys seeing his parents irritated at his dawdling, and worried because he scares them into thinking he will starve. As a matter of fact, he will not starve if the situation is handled correctly. Allow him three regular meals with one light lunch of orange juice or tomato juice, or even a piece of apple in the morning, and a glass of milk in the middle of the afternoon, with absolutely no other between-meal offerings. He may not need the lunches. Psychologists say that it is quite safe to believe no child who is mentally sound could ever hold out until starvation, if good food is placed in front of him. The portions served must be small at first, with an increase as his interest grows. One may often successfully serve the objectionable food first, promising the rest of the meal when this is finished.

Another method which often proves successful is that of holding back the dessert, and using it as a reward after the main dinner is all gone. It may also help to give half of the milk with the main dinner and the rest with the dessert. This is a good policy, because the child will not have a chance to fill up on milk before the other food is taken. It also gives him the satisfaction of another chance to pour from his pitcher. Water can be eliminated from the meals entirely. It is the one thing which should come between meals. If a child fills up on water at a meal, where will he put milk and solid food?

If children are worried, excited or extremely disappointed, they will not eat. In this case do not expect them to, because their bodies are not in a condition to digest food, anyway.

Children can be shown how to have a general interest in food by their own help in the preparation of it. In this case mother must take time to allow for pleasant associations in the kitchen or garden. If May or Bobbie themselves scrape the carrots, shell the peas or butter the sandwiches, they are going to enjoy these foods more when they see them again on the table. One four-year-old girl who had learned to enjoy her food thru assistance in the preparation, was also concerned with the eating habits of the other members at the table. Often when she ate her dinner she would relate her experiences in the kitchen as she prepared the foods served, telling often how hard it was to fix this kind of vegetable or how long it took to spread all those sandwiches. This attitude was good for the rest of the children, too. They were proud that someone in their own little world knew something about food and its preparation.