



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Raising Children Who Don't Eat in a Food-Centered World by Sharon Gauld

Food, glorious food. I love to eat. I love everything about food, actually. Growing it, picking it, coming up with new ways to prepare it, sharing it, and yes, eating it. So isn't it a little ironic that I have two children whose main source of nutrition is liquid?



Both my children have little to no stomach motility and poor esophageal and colonic motility. My oldest, at five, will eat cheese sticks and crackers. She also enjoys butter and other condiments. My two-year-old loudly proclaims his dislike of food, but can be persuaded to have canned peaches or pears and the odd bite of apple.

A Food-Centered World

I never realized how much of life centers on food until now! How much family life revolves around it. How much social time is devoted to it. How birthdays and holidays center around it.

The first thing you do when you wake up is eat. Lunch may be at home, the office, school, or daycare, but we all know supper should be at home as a family supper. Pick up any parenting magazine and you will see article after article extolling the virtues of the family meal. Statistics bombard you with numbers showing how much healthier children are both mentally and physically when they eat with their families on a regular basis. How they are less inclined to get into trouble in those treacherous teen years. How the mere act of setting the table and preparing a meal together can boost a child's self esteem.



How does this make me feel as a mother? Am I failing my child and my family because my children aren't learning how to rip lettuce or how to set the table? Is it a problem that they don't learn how to let go of their deepest thoughts and bond with the family while breaking bread?

What do you do when your children don't eat? Not only are you not having set meals, it becomes a huge challenge to feed yourself when you have young ones. They don't want

to sit still while you take the time to cook, and they certainly don't want to then spend another hour watching others eat.

Even our everyday vernacular revolves around food. "Mom, when can we go outside?" "After lunch sweetie." "When is lunch?" Oh right. They don't have the ability to divide their days according to mealtimes, as we don't have meals! Does it make a difference they roughly judge the time of day by which round of medicines it is?



Birthdays and holidays come with their own challenges, too, particularly when you want to get together with other family members. After five years of this, we still find we have to explain that our children are not picky eaters, and it does not matter if it's broccoli or chocolate cake. They don't want to eat it. Eating hurts them. It's hard for our children to constantly be cajoled into eating and to be made to feel there is something to be embarrassed about when they don't want or eat food. It hurts to watch them try not to throw up at the mere sight of some foods.

How long do you keep buying the food, trying to find the time to cook, only to throw it in the garbage? How long do you persevere, all the while cursing those who insist it's somehow your fault, thinking, "If I just make this meal special enough, cook with the right ingredients, make the delicious smell, then they will HAVE to eat!"

Our Strategy for Thriving

We have tried to create new ways for our family to bond. We have an island in our kitchen with bar stools. We call it Mama's Milk Bar. The kids have their liquid meal drinks, and I can usually whip something together on the other side for my husband and me to eat.

We skip large family holiday meals and invite everyone over on other days to celebrate. Sometimes we will try and do a quick meal or a buffet style dinner. It usually works as long as we designate someone to be with the kids during the meal and then eat later.

Halloween treats get swapped out for a toy, and the Easter bunny usually brings a token chocolate and a toy, too. Christmas dinners are candy canes. Summer BBQs involve lots of popsicles.

Someday, I hope to cook a large family meal and watch my children's eyes light up at the thought of it. I hope to make popcorn for movie night and cookies and hot chocolate after a day of playing in the snow.

But in five years, I have yet to hear a complaint about it from my children. They fill me with pride each and every day. Despite the countless rounds of medical appointments, the chronic pain, and the knowledge that they are "different," they are happy, their health is managed well and they are growing in more ways than just food can provide.

We are a family filled with love. And contrary to popular opinion, we are living proof that while maybe you can't live on love alone, it sure is the key to thriving.

Sharon lives in Alberta, Canada with her husband, two children, and if her daughter has anything to say about it, we will soon add a cat. Her children have an undiagnosed suspected genetic metabolic condition and are currently undergoing more testing. The umbrella diagnosis at this time is simply Dysautonomia. You can read more about them at thegaulds.blogspot.com