

# FOOD FIGHT-

*Sandie Groeber MD, FAAP, Town Pediatrics*

There are several recipe books on the market recently teaching parents how to hide vegetables, fruit or meat into foods their children will eat to compensate for their not eating these nutritional items otherwise. This "Trojan Horse" approach can aid in achieving the short-term goal of increasing vitamin and mineral content of current meals. However, it loses sight of the long-term goals of raising open-minded, easy-going eaters who are low-maintenance so that parents aren't jumping through hoops and enabling their children's wary attitude toward healthy foods.

Ultimately, the healthiest eaters have developed an uncomplicated relationship with food and eating: they're not eating to please someone else or to avoid someone else's displeasure. They don't confuse food with love or with filling an emotional need. These pitfalls are more likely to develop if a child develops a "triangular" relationship between 1) his/herself 2) food and 3) parent(s). If parents can keep themselves out of their child's relationship with food things can go more smoothly for a lifetime.

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Delineation of responsibilities is a great first step. As parents, we are responsible for choosing which food to purchase, preparing and serving food and we are in charge of how long our children sit in their high-chairs or seats. This should be a discussed and consistent duration for each meal and can be whatever works for your household schedule. 30-45 minutes is fine from toddlerhood-on-




up. Each child is solely responsible for the eating part (we need to let go of this part, not just verbally but where it counts - up in our heads.) At the end of the established meal-time the food is nonchalantly cleared from the table/tray and the meal is over. If they ate, they ate. If they didn't, they didn't. (It's reasonable to give 10 and 5 minute warnings to kids who can't be/aren't clock-watchers.)

Avoiding the triangular relationship also means no ordering, pleading or cajoling kids to eat. Talk about that day's activities, friends, etc and take the focus off of the food. Let the bites be their idea, not yours - that way there's no control struggle. At the meal's end if they've eaten the majority (2/3 or 3/4 - whatever seems right to you) of the total food volume on the plate and tasted each item served (a good rule to establish and a reminder during the meal seems reasonable) then they've earned not only dessert (and there doesn't need to be one at every meal) but a snack later if they're hungry before the next meal. For the meal that wasn't eaten well (according to the family rules) it gets removed from the table at the end of meal-time with no lecture or anger.... but also no dessert and no snack later. If they're still hungry or come back later hungry then these are good opportunities for them to realize how lucky we are to have such easy access to an abundance of quality foods...more of which will be served at the next meal "so you'll

have another chance then to eat." Our children have the chance to fix that hungry feeling at the next meal (and learn a useful lesson that's not harmful) whereas others in the world don't - so, don't give in. Even preschoolers who don't understand these concepts fully will eventually put 2 and 2 together.

Keep in mind many toddlers require 4 meal-times each day if their breakfast is early AM. Also, some people at any age are what I've come to call obligate grazers and don't tolerate well the normal fluctuations of blood sugar (within the normal range) between meals that the rest of us do. Without nutrition intake every 3 hours or so they "fall apart": have decreased attention span, increased tantrums, crankiness, headache or dizziness. Consequently, more frequent, albeit smaller, meals make their and your day better. (Only in the case of rare metabolic diseases is it unsafe for a child to miss a meal they've chosen to not eat. If your pediatrician feels your child is healthy then this shouldn't be a worry.)

This system puts you in the position of referee, just enforcing the rules that have been established. Take away the audience and the melodrama runs out of steam. Your child learns that the outcome is linked to the choices that he/she made, NOT to your desires or choices. You are no longer in the triangle, you are just "calling the game" as the calm referee. Tom McGorry MD, FAAP once told me "No child has ever starved who had nutritious food available to them on a regular basis." This became my mantra at meal-times with my own girls. Blood pressures get lower and meal-times are more enjoyable for everyone if you can disentangle yourself from control issues over food. 

## Town Pediatrics, PC



Patricia F. Rappaport, MD, FAAP  
Sandra J. Groeber, MD, FAAP  
Nancy Tang, MD, FAAP  
Azza H. Idris, MD, PhD, FAAP  
Janine A. Rethy, MD, MPH, FAAP, IBCLC



823-F South King Street, Leesburg, Virginia 20175  
Phone: (703) 777-5222 Fax: (703) 777-5144  
[www.townpeds.yourmd.com](http://www.townpeds.yourmd.com)