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Adventures in Parenting

The Food Writer and Her Picky Eater

By **Debbie Koenig** October 27, 2013 8:27 am

Some children are omnivorous, equally enthusiastic for broccoli and brownies. Mine, on the other hand, is non-nivorous. For almost five years now, since he turned 2, Harry's will-eat list has allowed fruit, snacky things, plain pasta with olive oil, yogurt and mozzarella (shredded only, thank you very much), and sometimes chicken. Oh, and hot dogs. His favorite "vegetables": olives and capers.

Harry's no different from many other picky eaters. I'm what's different. I'm a food writer. Given that I specialize in family-friendly food of the "cook once, feed everyone" variety, people assume my child can't wait for dinner each night. In reality my work is often little more than an exercise in humiliation.

I'll spend hours developing a recipe (even a 30-minute recipe takes work!), creating a meal with layered flavors to please my husband and me. The spread always incorporates basic elements that Harry can pull out for himself. I won't play short-order cook, but I understand that a 7-year-old might not appreciate Aleppo pepper on his chicken. His portion, I leave plain. Assembling all those moving parts turns the dinner table into a giant game of KerPlunk.

Sometimes the game is fun, like when Harry tried the ginger-and-lime-scented noodles that went inside the Korean-style beef lettuce wraps. (The noodles got a thumbs-down. Still, in my world, Harry tasting something counts as a victory.) Other times I expect to win big, as when I create a colorful make-your-own taco salad bar, and then he takes nothing but tortilla chips. That's when I want to grab my marbles and quit, while I still have some marbles to grab.

After a particularly tense meal, I'll dwell on all the ways I've failed my child, how I've dragged out this battle of wills long past the point where I should've stopped fighting — years past it. Clearly, I am a terrible parent.

Until someone else suggests I am, that is. Every so often, some attention-grabbing blogger will boast about how her adorable tot just can't get enough blue cheese on his spinach salad. Then she'll list all the ways she instilled that love of food in her child. This implies, of course, that I'm responsible for Harry's refusal to try Parmesan, no matter how many times I tell him that it's basically salt.

Those digs at the parents of picky eaters bring out my inner Lewis Black. I rant about the smugness, the sanctimony. I love food! I celebrate food for a living! We come together for family dinners almost every night! And still my child eats air. You can't say that somehow I created this frustrating little monster.

Only I can say that.

Desperate for expert advice, I called Ellyn Satter, a registered dietitian nutritionist, who wrote several books about raising adventurous eaters without losing your mind. In minutes, she reframed the issue.

"He's doing this because he's like you," she said. "His sensory perception is probably really strong. Given your predilection for delicious food, yours probably is too. You've learned to make it work for you. In his case, right now it's overwhelming."

So it's my fault on a genetic level. It's also not my fault — he was born this way.

"He wants to be exactly like you, but he just can't right now," she added. "In time he'll learn to manage his perceptions, but it has to be at his own pace."

She recommended that I continue to do what I'm doing: Serve a variety of foods family-style so Harry can choose what he wants. In addition, I should make it clear that he never has to eat a particular food — the decision belongs to him. And then I should stop talking about food at the table, possibly forever.

To a food writer, that last command seems downright unnatural. Discussing how something tastes, what pleases and what misses the mark, is a crucial step in

developing a recipe. But I've been holding my tongue for the last week, and mealtime has become pleasant. Harry still eats very little, and I pretend not to notice. I remind myself that he's growing as he should be, and that in three years of school he's had only three sick days. I'm learning to trust that someday, hopefully soon, he'll put a little tomato sauce on his pasta.

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