

Eat Right Without a Fight: Raising Happy & Healthy Eaters



Fiona Sutherland, APD
Dr Justin Coulson, PhD

Copyright © 2014 by Fiona Sutherland and Dr Justin Coulson

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

ISBN 978-1-312-73610-8

www.bodypositiveaustralia.com.au

www.justincoulson.com

Who are we?

About Fiona Sutherland

I am Director of Body Positive Australia and an Accredited Practising Dietitian. I'm also Mum to 2 busy pre-schoolers (my main job)! I have been a specialist in eating behaviour, body image, eating disorders and sports nutrition for around 15 years, spending my week doing a vast array of tasks - kinder duty, speaking to groups of teachers at schools, providing nutrition therapy for people who have real difficulty with food and their bodies, working with the young dancers at The Australian Ballet School, planning the family meals. And the list goes on!

As a parent, I feel like I really understand the frustrations of mealtimes. I've been there! In fact, in all honesty I'm still there. But I've been really lucky to learn from some incredible colleagues in the area of feeding kids - and the truth is, it's never too late to start.

I'm a passionate advocate for the importance of kids being offered an environment in which they feel fantastic in their natural body and, most importantly, are deterred from dieting or using food to cope with life's difficulties.

You can find me at www.bodypositiveaustralia.com.au

About Dr Justin Coulson

I'm a parenting researcher, speaker, and author. And I'm a parent myself - my wife and I are parents to our 6 daughters. I have a PhD in psychology, and have worked as a lecturer at the University of Wollongong, where I remain an honorary fellow.

I'm the parenting expert at www.kidspot.com.au, and write weekly advice columns for the Daily Telegraph, as well as regular opinion pieces on parenting and associated topics. I appear as a parenting expert on The Project, TODAY, and other television programs.

I wrote this book with Fiona for a couple of reasons. First, I receive regular requests for help from parents who are trying to get their children to make positive food choices, and have a 'healthy' relationship with food. Second, as a father to 6 girls, it was important to me that I understood what my girls need to have a good relationship with food, and a positive body image. I'm all too aware of the scary statistics related to girls, eating, body issues, and so on. This book is my effort to get great information to other parents who worry about the same things I do.

You can find me at www.justincoulson.com

As you will see, we share a passion for the importance of providing your kids with an environment in which they can truly shine. We hope you enjoy our book, and can find some strategies to make your mealtimes a more peaceful place.

Introduction

"I just want my kids to eat something good for them!"

Children can be hard to feed. They don't like the food we prepare them. They don't want to eat when we suggest they ought to eat. They make meal time feel like a power struggle.

As babies, we offered our kids wholesome and nutritious foods and they *loved it*. Then sometime during the toddler years, things changed and ARGH, they changed their mind and one food at a time, decided that they had changed their mind!

In the morning we beg children to have a healthy breakfast – or at least *something* for breakfast – to start the day off on the right foot. They refuse to eat anything substantial. Sometimes they eat nothing at all, so they start the day on an empty stomach.

We thoughtfully prepare healthy lunches that provide great variety so our kids won't be bored, and when we open their lunchboxes we see that the food has come home uneaten - or the children throw it in the bin and come home starving! Or they might scrounge change from their friends and buy unhealthy food at the tuck shop rather than eating the food we have prepared them.

We slave for hours cooking delicious, nutritious meals and serve them to a brood of children who whine about how they "hate this dinner." Then they beg for nuggets and chips.

When it comes to outings, picnics, parties, or occasions away from home we encourage them to go easy on the sugary foods, but they go straight for soft drinks, lollies and bright green icing.

And then.....*grandparents!* In spite of all of our best efforts to keep our children eating well, Nan and Pop seem intent on undermining us. If we say "no" to it, they indulge them. Our healthy options are replaced with... well, (*clears throat)... less healthy options.

We want our children to eat healthy food because we know it will

- improve their wellbeing,
- increase their health,
- make them strong, and
- enhance their enjoyment and quality of life

Sure, they can enjoy a fun snack from time to time, but can't they just be grateful that we are trying to teach them important habits that will help them be healthy for life? It seems that for many of us, our children have other preferences.

Getting it right without a fight

When it comes to healthy eating, we want to get it right without a fight. We dream of sitting down to a delicious meal, full of colourful vegetables. As we take in the aroma of our dish we recognise the key food groups represented in ideal proportions and smile, knowing we are meeting our family's nutritional needs. Our children say things like, "Oh wow! I love all these vegetables!" and "Gee mum (or dad), I love it when you cook these scrumptious, healthy meals."

Some of us also dream of the day that our children will look at a bag of chips or a bowl of lollies and willingly say, “Hmmm, not today. I think I’ll have this apple and those nuts instead.” Or that they will come home from school, gratefully explaining to us how much they enjoyed their nutritious snacks and healthy sandwich.

Reality bites

Unfortunately, for far too many of us, our children fuss when we serve up the healthy alternatives. Many parents have told us about all-out tantrums. Their children want pasta but nothing else. No sauce, meat, or veggies. Or they want cereal for dinner. Or they want anything at all **except** for the healthy alternative they’ve been offered. Some research suggests only about 1 in 100 Aussie kids are getting enough fruit and vegetables in their diet. When children are told ‘no’, the entire street can hear the screaming and wailing from the offended child.

Then there are all of those other reasons that our kids refuse to eat. Little children, in particular, can be tremendously trying. One blogger complained that his young son wouldn’t eat dinner for the following reasons:

1. I don’t want a baby spoon
2. This spoon is too big
3. Mum makes it taste better (Dad had cooked that night)
4. Oranges are scary
5. Pasta is scary
6. I want a big boy cup
7. I spilled my drink
8. Milk is scary
9. It makes my lips tingle
10. This plain pasta is too spicy
11. I’m tired
12. I just want dessert
13. I don’t like salad
14. She looked at me
15. He looked at me
16. It’s too cold
17. It’s too hot
18. I don’t like yellow scrambled eggs
19. My sister touched me
20. My sister won’t sit next to me
21. “What are you making?” (And then, whatever it is) “I don’t like that.”

The list continues!

While we can’t help you with ALL of these issues, we believe we can make mealtime much easier than it seems to be in many families. We address eating for toddlers and pre-schoolers in Chapter 6 but here’s a few notes on fussy eating to start (because we know it’s a hot topic!).

Isn’t fussy eating a problem?

Well, we’re told so right? And when something isn’t going the way we want it to (a child stops accepting certain foods), then we can become more concerned about getting the child to eat it. Especially if it’s healthy and nutritious foods which help them grow. Often, the child doesn’t

want to play that game, which creates resistance and can make the fussy behaviour worse. If you recognise yourself in this, one suggestion as a first step is that you can *change the way you view fussy eating*. Do you see it as a “*problem that needs to be fixed?*” Or do you see it as a (usually) normal phase in most children’s development that you can help them through with consistency, support and encouragement? We are sent a strong message that if we can control our kids eating, then it will improve and they will become less fussy. In all honesty I’ve never met a parent for whom this is true (although it may work for some), yet this is a tack most parents take in an effort to address fussy eating. Kids kick back when they are being controlled, and parents feel guilty or like failures if their well-meaning efforts are being rejected. No one wins.

Changing your view of fussy eating can help in a number of ways:

- You can put some more energy into things that you CAN control, such as providing a variety of foods (familiar, new).
- You can focus on other children in the family, and your partner
- You can keep your expectations age-appropriate and realistic
- Your meal times can be more peaceful, even if your child still isn’t accepting the variety of foods that you would prefer

It’s not your fault.....

Unfortunately, many parents are not really prepared for what can be an evitable part of your child’s journey with food and eating, particularly during the toddler years and beyond. We are sold a message that if you do everything the “right” way, your kids will happily eat whatever you serve to them and that somehow fussy eating can be prevented. Not only is this incorrect, but adds fuel to the “guilty parent” fire which so many parents find themselves in regularly!

Although there are certainly ways in which we can help influence our children’s interactions with food, there are definite reasons why kids become more fussy during the toddler years - these include normal development, a child’s temperament, changes in appetite, rapid growth, what is being served and the eating environment.

A child’s interactions with food is part of their development and the process of learning. Kids learn at their own pace, not one dictated by us and learn best when given time, and patience.

So here’s the bottom line - you are not to blame if you have a fussy or selective eater. You haven’t done anything wrong. You can, however optimise your child’s experience with food and eating by providing an environment where they can interact with, and have new experiences with food, that encourage greater variety and more importantly, a more positive and less stressful time at the dinner table.

HOW do we feed them?

A lot of parents are also really confused about what kids ‘should’ and ‘should not’ be eating. There is so much information out there – and it keeps changing. We are supposed to avoid sugar, go without gluten, eat fruit – but not too much – get 5 serves of vegetables, and so on. We must avoid this and make sure we include that, or we’re bad parents. We aren’t doing our best for our kids. These lists just make us feel guilty, inadequate, and disempowered.

The real trouble, however, may be that there is precious little information available about HOW to feed your child (and we don’t mean “with a spoon!”). You can be told *what* to give your

children, but knowing *how* to feed them is an entirely different issue. As a caring and concerned parent you want the nuts and bolts of providing nutrition for your children in a way that both you and they feel good about.

It is this *how* that this e-book is about.

What this book is about, and what it's not about...

So this e-book is not about nutrition per se. Chances are that if you are reading this book, you already have a pretty good idea of what's healthy and what's not. Or, to use better terms, what is an everyday food, and what is a sometimes food. But we do promise a few tips towards the end if you're feeling really stuck.

Instead, this e-book will offer you snippets of advice or suggestions that can help you:

- Identify common mistakes parents make in trying to promote healthy eating
- Stop the food fights and put an end to the power struggles
- Increase the range of foods your children will try (and hopefully love)
- Develop and implement strategies for children from toddlers to twelve year-olds
- Guide your children as they develop the skills to eat good foods independently
- Establish an environment in which your kids have the best chance to have a healthy, balanced relationship with food and eating in the long term

In short, this e-book has been written as an appetising, easy-to-digest, response to the hundreds of parents who ask us a variation of the same question:

“How do I get my children to eat healthy food without the yelling, screaming, fighting, and arguing that accompanies so many of our mealtimes?” or “How can I stop negotiating and making deals with my kids when it's not what I really want to do, and doesn't help?”