

PARENT GUIDE

Manhattan's One & Only

JUNE 2005

Food Fighting

Identify your child's eating style.

by Donna Fish

Does your 6 year old eat only white or beige food? Is your formerly adventurous eater barely touching her food? Are you under the tyranny of your 3 1/2 year old's demands for sweets and worrying that he'll gain too much weight or stop eating anything else? Well, read on, because kids have some typical eating behaviors that I have grouped into six "styles" to help you figure out: Is this a problem? And if so, what can I do to help?

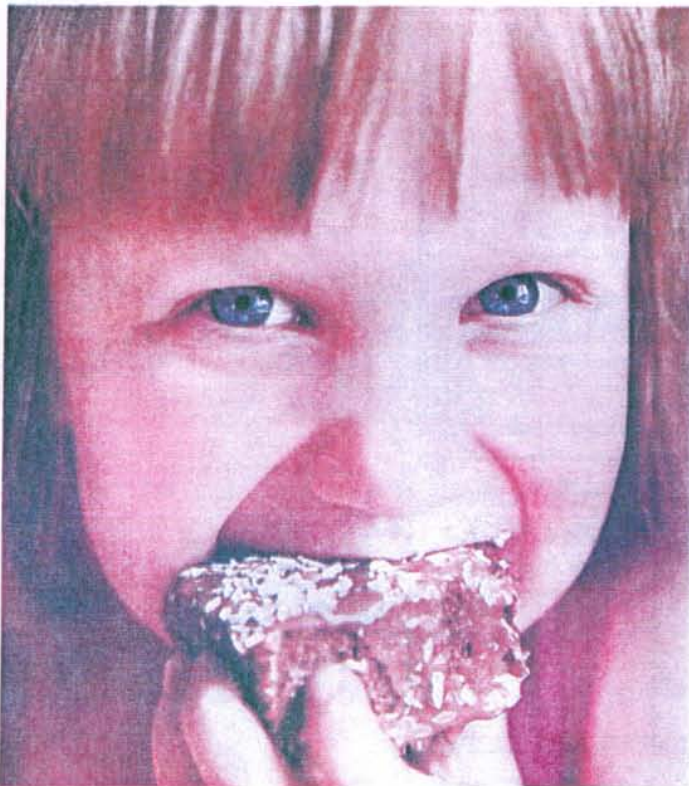
The Six Eating Styles

THE FOOD DEMANDER: makes incessant demands for a certain food (usually sugar) and keeps saying: MORE! He can be strong willed, (as opposed to easygoing and compliant), and turn mealtimes into power struggles. This can really get going around age 3 1/2 when kids struggle for more individuality and control.

THE TROUBLE TRANSITIONER: is the child to whom you need to say, "Ten more minutes till mealtime!" He has trouble moving from a previous activity to the dinner table, and can have difficulty stopping eating once he starts. These children love the stimulation of food in their mouths and have trouble 'shifting gears.' This can start a habit of overeating where they think being full is not simply comfortable, but stuffed.

THE PICKY EATER: eats very few foods and won't try new things. He can be sensitive to colors, smells and textures. This is not necessarily a problem, but if you notice him having trouble chewing, any speech delays or other motor coordination problems, consult your pediatrician.

THE BEIGE FOOD EATER: doesn't like color; white or beige food is what goes down! He tends to avoid strong tastes and doesn't like to try new



things. According to pediatrician Michael Traister, M.D. of NYC: "The beige food eater demonstrates the most common eating pattern throughout childhood."

THE SPURT EATER: barely eats for days and then chows down. Typical of toddlers and preschoolers, it may appear that he subsists on air, only to eat voraciously several days later, playing 'catch-up' with his biological needs.

THE GRAZER: loves to nibble throughout the day and hates to sit down for a meal. He can be easily distracted and may have a small appetite, preferring little bits of food every few hours. This type of behavior is

typical for toddlers who are developing their motor skills, they would rather be off and running than sit to eat!

Although these behaviors may not fit in with your idea of how your child "should" be eating, here are some tips to help you worry less, or do something to help.

TIPS:

-Food Demanders

•Establish clear rules about treats such as soda, junk food and sweets, but be sure to give kids choices about when they want the treats. You can say: "Do you want the cookies now, after lunch or later with your brother after dinner?"

•Give up some control when you can and figure out where you can be less rigid, while still maintaining your parameters.

•Help them learn to wait to check back with their body to see if they are really hungry. Statements like: "You are the one who knows how your body feels, but you have to listen carefully to be a good body detective. Sometimes you have to wait to hear the signal clearly, so you know what your stomach is telling your head."

-Trouble Transitioners

•Introduce a transition activity that includes you: clear the table, do the dishes, chat; often they will have shifted focus from eating to something else.

•Asking them: "Where are you feeling the hunger— in your stomach or anywhere else?" teaches kids about separating emotions from hunger, which is only felt in the stomach!

-Picky Eaters

•Check with your doctor that they are on their growth curve. (If so, they're getting what they need.)

•Allow them to portion out their own food.

•Model your own enthusiasm for eating with a: "Oh good, more for me" attitude!

•Don't get discouraged or be held hostage in the kitchen. Pick one or two options that they can get for themselves if older, or you can have easily on hand if younger.

•Let them eat less. Don't take it personally!

-Beige Food Eaters

•Find fruits and veggies that are pale; for 'carb' kids, Cream of Wheat gives lots of what they need.

•Reassure yourself not to worry if they are healthy. Remember 99 percent of children in this culture get adequate nutrition.

•If you are still worried, ask your pediatrician about giving a multivitamin

with iron, because as one nutritionist put it: "Your child needs a calm mommy, not a stressed out mommy."

-Spurt Eaters

- Remember the days they play catch up; hold your breath and know they won't starve themselves.
- Write down what your child eats for two to three weeks so you can really see what they get.
- Don't show how much you care if they eat; this can put them off. Let them feel their own hunger.
- You are being a great parent if they eat for themselves, and not for you.

-Grazers

- Remember that little bits add up. Little kids have little tummies.
- Be aware of the size of the snack bag you are taking to the park. Are you being held hostage by whines and your own fears that they might go hungry?
- As they grow, extend the time between eating.
- Make sure your child isn't eating out of boredom. We all fall into the trap of feeding our kids at times when they are whining (sending food to the back seat

of the car in response to the old: "Are we there yet?!"); Sometimes this is not a problem. But you don't want them to use food to handle boredom or other emotions!

Most of all, remember that your child will keep changing! Use these as guidelines to take the fight out of food and enjoy meals as 'family' time for connecting and relaxing.

Donna Fish, MS, LCSW, is a licensed social worker specializing in eating disorders. An adjunct faculty member at the Columbia University School of Social Work, she is also an affiliate therapist at the Center for the Study of Anorexia and Bulimia and guest lecturer at Mount Sinai and Bellevue Hospital in NYC, and she consults with and does workshops on eating issues with a variety of PTAs and schools in Manhattan. She is the author of Take the Fight Out of Food, How to Prevent and Solve Your Child's Eating Problems (Atria Books). Visit www.takethefightoutoffood.com or www.donna.fish.com. She lives with her husband and three daughters in Manhattan where she also runs a private practice.

