

Winning the Food Fights



Why do they want to cover everything with ketchup? Why do they insist they hate something they've never even tried? If you've ever tried to get your child to eat without all the success you'd hoped for, **this new book may be just what you need.**

By Deanna A. Stephens

As the mother of a 22-month-old boy who has discovered the power of stating his dining opinions firmly, I couldn't have received more timely support than that of my latest read, *Food Fights: Winning the Nutritional Challenges of Parenthood Armed with Insights, Humor, and a Bottle of Ketchup*, by Laura A. Jana, M.D., FAAP, and Jennifer Shu, M.D., FAAP, and published by the AAP.

Readers are likely to have the same sentiment regardless of their child's age. After all, feeding one's children is an ongoing responsibility of parenthood that often becomes complicated by stage-specific needs — and that in addition to a mountain of well-intentioned advice and government recommendations. A quick search on “child nutrition” at Amazon.com Books finds



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more than 4,700 results. Pediatricians Jana and Shu know that despite being exposed to all that information, we are still left with questions. Fortunately, they have practical, reality-based answers.

A Tough Challenge

“It is impossible to ignore the fact that food-related battles rank right at the top of the daily list of parental challenges,” write the co-authors. They let you know right away that they mean business, but they do it with the kind of encouragement that you hope to gain from bonding with fellow parents. Barely into the first chapter of *Food Fights*, one sure statement is enough to convince you: “With some basic insights along with some palatable peace-keeping strategies, you can win the nutritional challenges of parenthood and play a defining role in shaping your child’s lifelong eating habits.”

Thank goodness I resisted the urge to skip the practical advice for the newborn period in lieu of heading straight for more curious matters — such as why “everything tastes better with ketchup.” With plenty of comic relief, Drs. Jana and Shu draw on research, anecdotes, their experiences as pediatricians and mothers, and best practices.

“Reviewing the underlying principles of what you do and what you do for your kids can serve as a powerful way to relate to them. Sometimes people can see it for themselves but not their kids,” says Dr. Jana.

Weighty Decisions

Before delving into the book’s main subject matter, Drs. Jana and Shu present two facts that can often be traced to poor nutritional habits: Children with obese parents are 80 percent more likely to become obese themselves, and 30 percent of American adults over the age of 20 are considered obese.

Once the idea is introduced, it seems obvious enough that a child wants whatever his or her parents eat. But it’s a great reminder for those of us who become parents believing we’ll become more health-conscious as our baby develops more astute observation skills.

If that’s the case, it is one of the first ways parents are vulnerable to “slippery slopes,” or routines that “ease themselves into existence while we’re too busy going about our parenting business to notice,” as the authors describe it.

“While we had every intention of focusing our

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attention on the questions parents typically ask that are specific to their kids, we constantly found ourselves discussing eating habits in general,” write the authors. “After all, if we as parents can’t get our own eating habits and waistlines under control, how is it that we think we will be able to teach our children to do so?”

Strategizing and Peacekeeping

“Parents often get themselves into a pattern and don’t know what’s coming or how to make the next transition. We’re giving people a heads-up before they turn what was a good thing into a bad habit,” says Shu. She points out that once these habits are formed, we often admit that if someone had told us ahead of time, we might have done things differently.

Consider some common examples, such as middle-of-the-night feedings, battles over the bottle, and the cure-all status of a sippy-cup.

Food Fights introduces 10 “palatable peacekeeping strategies” to keep in mind. Meant as techniques to solve or prevent food-related struggles, the ideas surface throughout the book and illustrate the power of being proactive, rather than reactive. They also provide comfort for parents, who shouldn’t feel that they’re facing this battle alone.

“A lot of principles are the same from age to age,” says Dr. Jana. “Once you extract all the fundamental principles, you can basically apply them to just about any food fight that arises.”

Patience Pays

There is a message embedded throughout the book that parents need to hear over and over: Be patient with yourself, be patient with your children. One of the peacekeeping strategies is emphatic on this point: “If at first you don’t succeed . . . try, try again.” Along with that, another point reminds you “the food pyramid wasn’t built in a day.”

Another solution involves some patience, as well: the “no thank-you” bite, a tried-and-true source of compromise. Studies show that it can take between 10 and 15 tastes of one type of food before a child accepts it or likes it. Offering your child one taste before allowing him or her to refuse a dish adds up toward the desired result.

“Don’t take ‘no’ as a rejection,” says Dr. Jana. “You’re making progress by just exposing your child to new foods and flavors.”

Away from Home

Aside from its focus on the habits of daily eating in addition to the other body functions associated with it, a large section of *Food Fights* is dedicated to the challenges of eating away from home. This can entail dining with family and friends, at restaurants, and even on a plane.

“If you set the tone with consistency and expectations, children will be more likely to know that you expect them to act that way at somebody else’s house or a restaurant,” says Dr. Shu. “You always have to look at the next step.”

Indeed, *Food Fights* helps give you the confidence to look ahead to that next step. You don’t need to be daunted by the prospect of reading through every “childhood nutrition” book on the market. An outline of children’s tales recommended in the chapter called “Read All About It!”, however, seems like a much better idea.

Just remember: Your food fights are a battle your entire family can win one bite at a time. Having this timely battle plan in your hands is a great place to start. ●

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