

CHAPTER 1

Rose coloured carrots

“Hi, just read your book "Don't Tell Them It's Healthy". IT WORKS. Had my 5yr old daughter telling me this morning that "she needs some broccoli" because her little sister was stronger than her and pushing her around. I said that's good because there is some in your lunch box and she was thrilled. This is after one afternoon of using this tactic. THANK YOU!”

~ **Tabatha W, mother of two**

The last time I checked, McDonald's didn't serve fresh carrot sticks. However, according to a study published in the *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, preschoolers prefer the taste of carrots when packaged in a McDonald's bag. The 'brandless' carrots just didn't taste as good. Neither did the brand-free french fries, hamburger and chicken nuggets, even though they were genuine McDonald's products simply served in a plain bag without the big 'm' present.

So what does it mean when kids prefer the taste of carrots wrapped in fast food packaging? Should you start serving veggies in brand-name containers to get them to eat up without the usual tantrums?

No. It does not mean you should start serving vegetables draped in corporate logos. This would only be a short-term quick fix that could further diminish your power as a parent. This study simply shows that kids respond to good and consistent marketing.

Short-term quick fixes

You are a parent so it's natural to want the best for your child. This includes excellent health and good eating habits. But how do you get fussy, strong-willed and plain old stubborn children eating healthy food on a daily basis? You could use short-term quick fixes such as nagging, smacking, shouting, hiding vegetables in more desirable food and banning TV viewing. However, these methods create problems in the long term including selective deafness (created from nagging), kids that shout and hit others (possibly from mimicking their parent's or sibling's way of solving problems), fussy eating habits (from lack of exposure to 'visible' veggies), and more.

Key points to remember

- * Short-term quick fixes are only beneficial in the interim and they can cause more hassles for you in the long run.
- * Keep nagging to a minimum (yes, you can still nag a little bit).
- * Don't smack or shout unless you want to raise a child who is good at smacking and shouting.
- * Limit hiding vegetables in more desirable food as your child needs to get to know vegetables on a first-name basis (I'll give you the tools to do this in Chapter 3).
- * You can ban the television if you like, but be aware that your child is influenced by more than just TV commercials. There is the internet, friends at school and other peers, social media, advertising on busses and more. So why can't you use healthy and ethical marketing to be your child's biggest and most caring influence?

CHAPTER 2

Don't tell them it's healthy

“There is no such thing
as an attention span.
People have infinite attention
if you are entertaining them.”
~Jerry Seinfeld

You may want to promote healthy eating to your child but there is a right way and a not-so-beneficial way to do it. As a parent you need to keep this in mind if you want your child to comply with your health food rules. You also need to avoid making the following mistakes:

Don't tell them it's healthy

Sure there are studies that say fruits and vegetables, when consumed during childhood, can cut their risk of cancer when they grow up.^{1,2} But who cares? Not your healthy, energetic child. Remember, ‘being healthy’ is not your child’s personal goal, unless they are very, very ill. Children usually have other desires like being good at sport or computer games and making best friends.

The fact that a healthy diet can reduce a child’s risk of developing depression or anxiety during their teenage years is not worth mentioning either.³ Keep that gem to yourself. The words nutritious, good and healthy are boring, grown-up explanations as to why veggies, wholegrains and fruit are essential dietary requirements. You want healthy food to appear fun, not fuddy-duddy, so skip the dull health jargon for now.

Don't tell your child they'll get fat

You know it's true, more and more children are becoming obese or overweight in modern westernised countries. However, don't mention how eating the wrong food could make your child fat. And throw away your scales immediately! Your child should not be worrying about their waistline – they have enough to cope with, such as homework, girl's germs and their best friend being mean to them at big lunch.

Unfortunately overweight children can get taunted in the playground which can cause them some emotional stress so the last thing they need is you re-confirming their defectiveness.

Only broach the subject of weight if your child specifically asks for your opinion or help regarding being overweight. Otherwise use healthy marketing to convince your child to eat nutritious food and participate in outdoor activities. And give them the impression that you are guiding them towards healthy living just because you love them, not because they need 'fixing'.

Don't tell your child junk food will give them pimples (or do if your child is a pimply teenager)

If your child has beautiful skin it's no use using the 'p' word as they just won't care. Pimples are someone else's problem. However, if your child does have pimples then by all means appeal to their vanity and tell them about the benefits of eating well.

According to Australian research published in the *International Journal of Dermatology*, 17 per cent of students have severe acne and this makes them more vulnerable to feeling depressed, ugly and isolated.¹² I don't mean to alarm you but these children are more likely to have suicidal thoughts.¹³ According to researchers, one in three teenagers with severe acne have suicidal thoughts and one in ten attempt to kill themselves.¹⁴ The scary news is these teens may not show the classic signs of depression. They may be putting on a brave face for the family so they don't receive life-saving therapy and dietary advice. And with some doctors still falsely believing that acne is not caused by diet (even though there is evidence showing that food plays a role in

modifying hormones), it's no wonder kids aren't getting the support they need.

If your child has acne then by all means, give them the good news about healthy eating habits and its positive effect on clearing up pimples. However, forewarning your clear-skinned child about zits is likely to be a waste of time.

Don't associate healthy food with punishment

Have you ever said 'If you don't eat all your veggies you'll be sent to the naughty corner', or 'If you don't eat your sandwich you can't have your ipad?' If so then you may be unwittingly associating healthy food with punishment and your child will fear missing out if they don't force down the lifeless green stuff you've put on their plate.

Eating vegetables seems like punishment enough to some kids without veggies also being associated with isolation and missing out on all the fun.

Don't tell your child chocolate is a 'sometimes' food

Health experts are now recommending we teach our children about 'sometimes' foods. They say chocolate, lollies and cake are 'sometimes' foods. Biscuits, pastries, iceblocks and hot chips are 'sometimes' foods. Nothing is really out of bounds but some foods are 'sometimes' foods while others are 'every day' foods like vegetables, fruits and wholegrains.

This is true and makes perfect sense to adults. However, don't tell your child chocolate, lollies and cake are sometimes foods. Don't even let them know that biscuits, pastries, iceblocks and hot chips are sometimes foods unless...

Unless you also tell your child WHEN sometimes is.

You see, sometimes is a vague word that can turn a mild-mannered child into an argumentative monster if used carelessly. Kids just don't know when sometimes is or when they can expect it to occur again. Is sometimes when mummy says so? Is sometimes when daddy's in a good mood? Why could I eat chocolate yesterday and not today? And kids reason that if they have a tantrum and cry

long enough that maybe, just maybe, 'sometimes' will come sooner.

Children also become resentful if they are constantly left in the dark when it comes to the household rules. They feel a lack of control. If someone kept changing the rules to suit themselves would you get annoyed and protest? If you had the guts to I bet you would. Kids don't have the 'polite' filters that adults often develop in order to fit into society. Kids don't usually think 'Oh, I'll put up with it and not say anything because I don't want to cause a fuss'. If kids see the rules changing on their parent's whim they respond with whingeing, nagging, sulking and they may get sneaky or angry or all of the above.

Although they'll never verbalise this, kids love clear-cut household rules. They thrive on them. When their world has a certain amount of predictability it helps them feel more safe and sure about life. This is one of the great secrets to having calm and happy kids. So tell them exactly when sometimes is.

- Iceblock Day is Friday.
- Chocolate Treat Day is Saturday (after sport etc).
- Lollies are for parties.

Don't tell your child they can have dessert if they eat all their dinner

A study of more than 350 Australian mothers found many are using food bribes to influence their child's behaviour.

- 25 per cent used food to alleviate their child's boredom.
- Approximately one third used food to settle their toddler or keep them occupied, even when they weren't hungry, and
- almost half of the mothers used food as a reward for good behaviour.¹⁹

As I've said previously, I've been guilty of this one. My daughter went through a stage where she would not eat enough dinner in order to save room for dessert. I heard myself saying you don't get dessert until you finish all your food and she would reluctantly eat the rest of her vegetables and rice, whingeing the whole time. Then she would complain about being too full. Of course

there was always room for dessert.

However, this form of sweet bribery doesn't teach a child anything valuable. In fact, it sets them on the path to bad eating habits in adulthood. There are plenty of overweight people who say they need to finish everything on their plate.

Sweet-treat bribes not only teach your child to eat beyond being full, it also rewards overeating with junk food. This is how bad dietary habits – ones that are really, really difficult to shake in adulthood – are formed.

Saying 'Eat all your dinner and you'll get dessert' can teach them to ignore that full feeling in their tummy which signals the body's got enough fuel to function optimally.

'You can have a chocolate if you stop crying' may be a quick way to cheer up a child but it also teaches them that emotional problems can be 'fixed' by consuming sweets. Many adults, when they are sad or have had a stressful day, make themselves feel better with a block of chocolate or an extra helping of ice-cream. They use the quick fix rather than addressing the real problem. Then they are left with two problems – stress and a bulging waistline. Now they have even more to feel unhappy about.

An extra milk bottle at night may be an effective way to settle a child in the short-term but it fails to teach them how to settle themselves so the parents end up having broken sleep for weeks, months or years longer than necessary. Yes, years!

If a child continues to be given food as a comfort, when they grow up food may continue to serve as a comfort whenever they are stressed, lonely or bored. This can lead to overeating and obesity and a confused person who doesn't know why they can't control their food intake.

Keeping a child quiet with extra snacks or drinks may be beneficial for our sanity but it's not good for their health. Children need to be taught to eat when they're hungry and preferably *at set mealtimes* and not in between. They need to know that good food is nourishment that will make them stronger, faster and gorgeous. It will not fix their emotional problems. Food is not love or comfort. It supplies fuel and building materials for the body. Nothing more and nothing less.

Don't give in to short-term gratification

Life can be tough sometimes. We do not always get what we want and expecting everyone to give in to us (just like mother did) often leads to disappointment, frustration and pathological unhappiness. Life does not offer us treats on cue and we do not usually get rewarded without a bit of work to warrant it. A child needs to learn how to delay gratification in order to later become a mentally healthy adult who understands that effort comes first and reward comes later.

But first we, the parents, need to delay our own gratification by not relying on quick fixes such as treats to pacify our child. We need to use healthy tools that are beneficial for our child's growth and mental wellbeing. We do this by using clever and kind marketing techniques to get kids enjoying healthy food at set mealtimes, without them being rewarded with unhealthy food. Their reward should be praise. You can't get fat on praise. And praise is great for their self-confidence too.

One way you can teach your child to delay gratification is to instruct them to eat their vegetables first. Tell them **'Eat the food you like the least first, and then eat your favourite food next'**. If they don't listen to you, rather than nagging you can make it into a dare or a fun challenge for them. For example, if my daughter has nearly finished her meal and there are still vegetables on her plate I'll jokingly say 'Broccoli must be your favourite food as it's still on your plate!' My daughter will let out a horrified 'No way', then she'll stuff the last of the broccoli in her mouth to prove me wrong. Then we laugh.

It's okay that kids don't love the taste of vegetables and you can use this fact to teach them how to delay gratification. Other ways to teach delaying gratification include getting them to make their bed before breakfast or cleaning up their room before they get their pocket money. As you can see, you also win as you get a cleaner house and a child who eats the food you prepare for them.

Key points to remember

- * Don't associate healthy food with punishment.
- * Tell your child WHEN 'sometimes' is. For example, Fried Food Friday's
- * Don't force your child to overeat and then reward them with dessert.
- * Don't keep your child quiet with extra snacks or drinks as this leads to overeating and emotional eating.
- * Don't give in to your own short-term gratification by using quick fixes to keep your child quiet, happy or agreeable. Food is not an honourable babysitter and it is not love or comfort. Food supplies fuel and building materials for the body. Nothing more and nothing less.

"I am still laughing just thinking about when I told my 4yr old girl about power fruit... It was amazing, and we have been talking about it for weeks now! And she will come out with things like "yeah lets have some power fruit so I can dance for a really long time". And when we are at the markets, she picks the "power fruit" that she would like to eat. And as for vegies, it is working well too. And for "sometimes food", you made a lot of sense. I would constantly say no to certain foods saying that we can only have them sometimes, but I never explained when that would be. So their "treat" for the week is "Nutella Sandwich Tuesday" which is only to be on grain bread (white bread no longer exists in our house). This also works fantastic. No more "Can I have a Nutella sandwich today? which I was dealing with almost every lunchtime... I am so glad that I was able to read your books."

~ **Jasmin Santosuosso, mother of one**

CHAPTER 3

Marketing magic – do tell them...