



DEMO NOTES

Feeding Kids

5/03

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The law says that you have to feed your children. On the subject of *what* you have to feed them, however, the law is silent. That's merciful for the parents of two year olds, who might otherwise have to explain to an officer of the court the rationale of a child who has decided to eat nothing but celery sticks and dry cheerios for the last three weeks. The law is content if you feed your children something like food something like three times a day.

This means that you're allowed to feed your children fast food burgers every night, or a macrobiotic diet, or to argue with them over whether or not they're going to eat the cooked broccoli. The first two ideas I'll leave alone, but I've got a solution for the third. If your child announces that he is *not* going to eat his broccoli, I suggest that you ask, with the best appearance of greed that you can muster, if you can have his broccoli. (If he gives it to you, you do have to eat every bite.) This will cause your child to question his position on broccoli slightly, which is more than you'll get if you force him to eat it himself. (Yes, you can do that, and even "win". You'll end up with a child who still hates cooked broccoli and a headache, so why bother?)

I think the best plan for feeding children is to cook a reasonable meal (reasonable being defined as something the majority of the diners will eat) and put it on the table. Serve all the children one bite of everything, and provide seconds upon request. Don't engage them in any conversation about what they might or might not like, and don't require anyone to clear their plate. From a child's point of view, this takes all the fun out of the food-as-power game, but I'm sure they'll think of some other way to entertain themselves.

Unless it's your secret dream to be a short order cook, I don't advise excessive catering to the eating desires of kids (or partners, for that matter.) It's one thing to avoid mushrooms because you're the only one who likes them, and quite another to cook three separate dinners every night. That said, it's useful to remember a few things about feeding kids, especially since they apply to an awful lot of adults, too.

* Some kids can't abide complicated foods. Carrots and peas mixed together is walking the edge for them, and your average casserole will send them right over it. Most people grow out of this naturally, and there's not much point in fighting with them about it. A meal of bread and salad while everyone else eats casserole won't hurt them a bit.

* The concept of "difficult to eat, but worth it" is an alien one to children. Don't waste artichokes or whole lobster on your average five-year-old. The exception to this is the child who drives you mad by eating very, very, slowly. You might as well give her an artichoke.

* Most kids like most fruit. Adults packing school lunches should remember, however, that no child will eat slow fruit in preference to playing tag. Grapes or strawberries are better than apples for this reason.

* Finger food, especially finger food with a dip, is heaven for children. The same child who will flatly refuse to eat cooked broccoli with a fork will devour it raw if there's a dip involved. This is a good thing to remember if you have a child who is a slow adopter of new foods.

* Children, like most people, strongly dislike certain foods. I've never understood why it's acceptable to make someone eat a food they hate based merely on their age. Think about the foods that you just can't bear to eat before you order a small person to clear her plate.

* If you tell a child that he probably won't like something, he probably won't. The reverse, alas, is not true. It's doubtless better to remain silent, or say something in a neutral tone of voice along the lines of "try it and see what you think."

Demo Notes – Feeding Kids

I am not generally allowed to go to conventional grocery stores, possibly because it's very hard to get me back out of one in a reasonable amount of time. Last week, however, I was both on vacation and on a mission to write my article. This led me to spend more than an hour in New Nugget (that's the one on Covell, for those of you who've just moved to town.)

There are many miracles of modern food packaging available in a conventional grocery store: pancake syrup in a microwaveable package, complete with an icon which changes color when nuked to the appropriate temperature; bacon already cooked to a crisp in a shelf-stable package (this, alas, reminds me far too strongly of a certain brand of dog treats); frozen chicken nuggets in the shape of dinosaurs (which somehow contain more fat per serving than the mozzarella nuggets from the same company); purple ketchup in a fancy bottle at just a bit more than the same brand of ketchup sans food coloring. Isn't food science wonderful?

But, as always when I'm allowed into the conventional stores, I ended up in front of my all time favorite shock value food display: the Lunchables™. For those of you who haven't shopped outside the Co-op in the last 30 years, Lunchables are meal kits of kid-attractive foods – crackers, cheese & lunchmeat, mini tacos, mini pizzas, mini hot dogs. They're (over) packaged in compartmented trays, and come with a juice drink and candy to complete the putative meal.

Nugget has 33 facings of Lunchables. I chose a package of cheese & salsa nachos, one of the few vegetarian options. My \$2.69 package contained:

1.75 oz chips
1.25 oz cheese sauce
1 oz of salsa
3/8 oz candy (a Nestle's Crunch bar)
a 6.75 oz Capri Sun drink

The chips are about the size of a nickel, so you can scoop up every drop of 29 grams of fat in the cheese sauce. The corn syrup laden drink (10% real fruit juice!) may be enough to quench the thirst caused by the amazing 1160mg of sodium. The amount of sugar and salt will probably kill your hunger, but the amount of food won't – you get just under 5 ounces of food, including the candy.

Lunchables contain a remarkably low food value per dollar and a remarkably high amount of landfill material, and they're the very model of an unhealthy diet. There's almost nothing right about Lunchables, and it's got to

be confusing to your average eight year old to have all that wrapped in an attractive package and marketed right at them.

The thing that offends me most about Lunchables, though, is the underlying message sent to kids (and harried parents) – that it's not only OK but even *desirable* to buy gratification in a package. True, that's a message that marketers have always sent, but it's somehow more alarming when it's (a) directed at kids and (b) in a form that blatantly leads kids to eat killer food as a regular meal.

What do you do if your kid longs for Lunchables? Probably the best argument from a child's point of view is financial. Economically, Lunchables are a poor choice, and most kids are sensitive to value. Let your child buy the Lunchable of her dreams provided that she figure out the true cost per pound of the ingredients, and then compare them to the cost of those same foods bought in bulk. I guarantee you that your eight year old can see the problem with tortilla chips that cost \$10.76 per pound.

And, of course, you must offer an alternative. Any housewares store will have a sturdy, reusable container with several little compartments. It's a great project for a Sunday afternoon to look through cookbooks and help your child plan a few lunches for the next week. Meal planning lets a kid learn any number of skills, and kids are generally in favor of lessons that you get to eat in the end. Best of all, an afternoon spent with a favorite grown up sends kids far better messages than that of Lunchables – that you care about your child, including what she eats, that even an eight-year-old can make good food, and that eating healthy and delicious food is rewarding. Take that, food marketers!