

Managing Food-Related Family Disagreements¹

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As children get older, they are more likely to express their needs and wants when it comes to choosing and preparing family meals (Gidding et al., 2006). If their desires are not supported by their caregivers, it can lead to food-related and mealtime disagreements. Family disagreements can have many causes—the most likely are poor communication, a controlling or permissive parenting style, and negative influences from other family members. Families need to understand the underlying causes of most conflicts so that they can learn to resolve them successfully. The successful resolution of family disagreements is important for maintaining strong family relationships and helping children form healthy attitudes about eating.



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Causes of Family Disagreements

Children and adults tend to have different views about food. The majority of children care only about the taste of food. However, adults are more likely to take the nutritional value of food into consideration. As a result, disagreements are likely to occur when children dislike the food prepared by their parents and refuse to eat it (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

However, children are not the only ones who may refuse to eat healthful foods. Adults also may refuse food if they do not like the taste.

When adults voice their distastes for certain foods in front of their children, they risk the potential of influencing their children's eating habits (Patrick & Nicklas, 2005). Children learn by example and may decide not to eat any foods their parents dislike.

Because every individual has different tastes, food-related disagreements among family members are common. But, parents can do a few things to prevent or resolve disagreements when they occur. The first is to focus on the parenting style. Some parenting styles are more helpful than others. The second is to focus on good communication. Disagreements are much more likely to occur when family members are unable or unwilling to speak clearly and to listen to one another.

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Parenting Style

There are several parenting styles, and each has its own way of responding to children's needs. The most effective style of parenting is referred to as the authoritative style (Patrick, Nicklas, Hughes, & Morales, 2005). Authoritative parents are both receptive and nurturing to their children; yet, they also set limits and enforce them to increase their children's ability to make smart choices (Patrick et al., 2005). Research studies have shown that the authoritative parenting style can help to reduce the number of disagreements between children and parents, which can lead to more cooperation from children, less conflicts at meal time, and the acceptance of healthier foods (Patrick et al., 2005).

On the other hand, an authoritative parenting style can lead children to feel their choices are being controlled (Patrick et al., 2005). This is because authoritative parents set and enforce limits, but are generally not flexible or nurturing to their children. Controlling a child's food choices limits the variety of foods to which they are exposed. This can lead them to be picky eaters or to think that they do not like certain foods simply because they were never able to try them (Patrick et al., 2005). At the other extreme are permissive parents who are receptive to their children's wants and desires, but do not set limits. Permissive parents are more likely to allow their children to make their own food choices, even if the food they choose is not healthy for them (Patrick et al., 2005).

In general, some parental control over food choices can help to ensure that children eat at least some healthy foods. But allowing children to decide what they will eat all the time can lead to unhealthy diets because children tend to choose foods that taste good even if the food isn't good for them. This situation can lead to picky eaters because children may be unwilling to try foods they didn't select themselves. Remember, it is your job to offer nutritious foods, and it is your children's job to decide how much they will eat (Gidding et al., 2006).

Resolving Conflicts with Good Communication

No matter what caused the initial conflict, using effective communication can help to resolve the issue. The six characteristics of effective communication are known as the RECIPE for good communication. These include Reflective listening, Encouragement, Compromise and Cooperation, "I" messages, Practice, and Engagement. By using this RECIPE for good communication, families can reduce



Figure 2. Credits: iStockphoto

the number of food-related conflicts and make it easier to adopt changes that result in healthier family meals.

Reflective Listening

Being a good listener involves the listener restating the issue to gain a full understanding of the situation, asking questions, and putting one's self in the other person's position. For example, if the child expresses a disinterest in a new food, you might respond by saying, "I understand it's hard to try new foods. Let's try it together." In this example, the listener reflected the child's concerns, and let her know that she would not have to try the new food alone.

Encouragement

It can be hard for people, especially children, to confront others about their concerns because they might believe their feelings won't be appreciated. Therefore, it is important for parents to show children, and for children to show parents, that they hear and understand each other's thoughts and feelings and are grateful that they are able to share what troubles them about a situation. For example, a parent might say, "I'm glad that you shared you don't care for broccoli. Tomorrow you can help me decide what vegetable we will have with dinner."

Compromise and Cooperation

Compromising ensures that no one has complete control over the decision making, which reduces the competition to "win." Cooperation satisfies everyone's needs and does not leave parents with the feeling that the child took control or that they gave in to the child's demands. For example, the parent might say to the child, "We are going to have carrots for dinner, but if you tell me your favorite way to eat carrots, I will make them that way."

“I” Messages

“I” messages are extremely important for good communication. By using “I” messages you are able to express how you’re feeling without blaming someone else for the way you feel. For example, saying “I feel bad when I cook a breakfast that no one will eat” is better than, “You make me so mad because you won’t eat this breakfast.”

Practice

Don’t get discouraged if this method of communication is not effective the first few times you try it. It can be difficult to adjust to, but stick with it and you will be successful!

Engagement

Stay engaged when trying to resolve the conflict. This involves tuning out any other distractions and focusing solely on the issue at hand and the person expressing his/her feelings. Everyone needs to give 100 percent attention to reach a solution acceptable to everyone.

Benefits of Conflict

The vast majority of people view conflicts as destructive, but in reality conflicts can be highly constructive and promote stronger family bonds and future cooperation. For example, a conflict over what to have for dinner can lead to family members working together to plan and prepare a new dish that everyone will enjoy. Families can use conflict as a learning experience and develop strategies to make sure everyone’s food likes and dislikes are considered.

Summary

Deciding on what food to buy and eat is a process that should involve input from all members of the family. When children and adults are forced to eat foods they do not like, the frustration they feel may lead to conflict with other family members. By involving the entire family in meal planning, shopping, and preparation, conflicts can be avoided because everyone will be part of the decision-making process. Have your children take part in meal planning and preparation in one or more of the following ways:

- Make a list of their favorite breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack foods.
- Give them a list of dinner options and allow them to create the meal from the foods on the list.
- Give your child a mini shopping list of food items to find when you go grocery shopping.

- Allow your child to help at mealtimes by giving him or her a job such as measuring and mixing ingredients.

If your children do not voice opinions about food choices, it doesn’t mean that they don’t have any or don’t want to be a part of the decision-making process. They do. It may be that your children do not know how to express their food preferences. Do your best to include them.

Learn More

For more information about managing family conflicts, contact your UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book). UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed online at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map/>.

Suggested Websites

Penn State Extension. (2007). *FRIDGE: Food, Family & Fellowship. An Intergenerational Nutrition Program*. Retrieved from <http://extension.psu.edu/youth/intergenerational/program-areas/nutrition-health/fridge/fridge-curriculum/view>

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