

Child of Mine, by Ellyn Satter, and Dr. Francine Kaufman's book *Diabesity* both advance theories about raising children with healthy eating patterns. These patterns are deeply rooted in the family's approach to feeding and predict risk for pediatric obesity and type 2 diabetes. *Child of Mine* provides insight into my feeding practices with my four children. The Explorer, The Regurgitator, The Enthusiast and The Butter-Licker, demonstrate how, even in the face of certain violations, adherence to Satter's principles can produce children within normal weight ranges and at little risk for obesity.

Having already raised two children, twenty-two and twenty years old, I reflect on my actions and the impact they had on my family. Twenty-two years ago I was full of energy and enthusiasm for parenting. Each milestone was new and exciting and feeding my children was my number one priority. Five years ago, two years shy of being an empty nester, I became pregnant with my third child. Not wanting him to be raised alone, my husband and I successfully delivered child number four. I cherish this unique parenting opportunity and until now, my approach to feeding has been fixed in time. Ellyn Satter's division of responsibility theory, that parents are responsible for the *what*, *when* and *where* and children for the *how much* and *whether to eat*, has illuminated where my feeding practices have succeeded and where they fell short. Shortcomings usually came in times of desperation and exhaustion – states all too familiar to parents of young children. While Francine Kaufman's book *Diabesity* does not specifically reference Satter's work, it is clear that in not exercising the structure set forth in the division of responsibility, parents put children at risk for pediatric obesity and type 2 diabetes.

As a private cooking instructor, I have rarely struggled with the *what*. Planning, cooking, serving and eating have always been a joyful experience for me. As Satter points out on page 12, these elements are necessary for a satisfying meal and increase the likelihood of engaging the

child. Satter asserts that once the food is on the table, the parent's responsibility is over; the child is then in charge. Assuming wholesome food is presented, this method is effective at raising a child within normal weight range. If, however, presented with processed convenience foods, the child will consume far too many calories, as these foods tend to be calorie dense. The risk of becoming overweight increases significantly. In Chapter 11 of *Diabesity*, Kaufman asks patients to achieve a new normal and move away from fast food. I rarely have processed food in our home because I know that it's over consumption is not healthful and if it's in the pantry it will get eaten. The temptation is too great. Therefore, I believe that being mindful of the *what* [Satter] and following a healthy food plan [Kaufman] aids children in self-regulation and puts them on the path to healthful eating.

With The Explorer, Satter's model played out as expected: From the time she was able to, she fed herself joyfully and enthusiastically. She was breastfed on demand for five months and seamlessly transitioned to solid food. We presented her with a wholesome variety of foods prepared in an accessible medium for her. Mealtime was calm and we never worried about her eating enough. Despite the chaos that life occasionally brought to our table, The Explorer was always able to focus on her meal and self regulate well. She displayed a confidence at the table that rivaled much older children. Satter makes it clear that part of being a successful parent is raising children who can manage themselves at mealtime. The parent's job is not to remove obstacles, but give the child the tools to overcome them and to allow them to clear hurdles by themselves. In this way, The Explorer was an Olympian - clearing every hurdle with grace and determination. It is no surprise that she not only grew into a healthy adult, but also now makes her living in the food industry.

Then came The Regurgitator. Reflux is never pleasant and being constantly drenched in my own breast milk brought a level of stress that I care not to reflect on. The hesitation with which everyone in my life had about holding him resulted in The Regurgitator being strapped to my body almost all of his waking hours – and he did not sleep much. “It appears that exhaustion drives us all to use methods we wouldn’t otherwise!” Satter points out on page 300. Introduction of solid foods before six months is not recommended and yet my desperation overrode my knowledge of this. At the age of three months, while still reclined in his bouncy seat, The Regurgitator was introduced to rice cereal. According to Satter, a child is ready for solid foods when they can sit up, open their mouth when a spoon is presented, closes lips over the spoon, and transfer food from the front to the back of the mouth. The Regurgitator exhibited none of these cues and yet I persisted in getting him to take the food, often making him smile so I could just get it in. In doing this, I breached the *what*, the *whether* and the *how much*; a trifecta of violations.

The reflux eventually gave way to drier days but I am unsure if this was a result of the solid food or simply maturity. My self-inflicted level of stress at feeding time continued well into The Regurgitator’s early childhood. He was never an enthusiastic eater, frequently spitting out food that took too long to chew and wanting to get up from the table before much was consumed. Had I just taken Satter’s advice and settled down, meals might have evolved into more productive, enjoyable feedings for him.

It was not until The Regurgitator entered preschool that things began to change. His activity level was always high and his body knew that more calories were necessary as he grew. At age five, it was clear that he had exceptional physical abilities and he enjoyed exercising them whenever he had the chance. He began to have more patience at the table and enjoyed his fuel more than ever. As an adolescent, he preferred to be outside exploring and running rather than

playing X-box. In Chapter Nine of *Diabesity*, Kaufman reflects on her own highly active childhood and how, in the early 1990's, opportunities for outside activity became more limited and indoor distractions became more dominant. The Regurgitator was born in 1992 into the first generation exposed to this shift to sedentary activity. Fortunately for him, his natural instinct to be constantly on the move shielded him from any temptation to remain indoors. At the table, he sat still only long enough to fill his tank and then he would move on.

Not much has changed, although he tends to spend more time at the table these days. Fueling takes time when you are six foot two and two hundred pounds. As a college athlete, feeding is central to his goal of weight maintenance. The Regurgitator self regulates with the precision of a scientist, adjusting his intake of macronutrients to achieve his weight goals. Needless to say, he no longer spits out his meat.

Although Satter did not reflect on the power of birth order and its effects on feeding, it is fascinating to me how the feeding practices and styles of my second set of children so strongly resemble those of my first-born children. The five-year old Enthusiast has always been a "good eater". Like his older sister The Explorer, he was breast fed on demand for five months followed by a smooth transition to solid foods. The Enthusiast's passion for consumption, however, goes beyond his older sister's and brings much attention to his feeding. "He's just like his father was," I often hear from my husband's family. "Look at that kid eat," mutter casual observers, "he's going to be a football player." Being that both my husband and older son were both talented football players, it brings The Enthusiast joy to imagine himself just like them. He's a big guy and everyone enjoys feeding him as he brings such enthusiasm to the process. On page 78, Satter presents Bridget, an eighteen month old with a passion for eating. Similar to Bridget, The Enthusiast can be a showman. Knowing that their eating styles attract attention, both Bridget and my son likely eat

more than they need when presented with an audience. Withholding food from passionate eaters as these is inappropriate and usually backfires. It tends to make a child preoccupied with food and overeat when given the opportunity. In following Satter's advice to Bridget's parents, I make an effort to remove the spotlight from The Enthusiast whenever I can. Controlling the environment and not the child assists in self-regulation.

Controlling the environment does not always mean limitation and restriction – sometimes it requires parents to let go within certain limits. Satter encourages parents to exercise this freedom within snack time: If offering cookies, let the child eat as much as they want – but only within the snack time zone. Nothing brings The Enthusiast more culinary pleasure than bacon – the smell and sight of it, or the mere thought of it creates a euphoria to rival Christmas morning. In our home, birthday tradition allows the celebrant to choose the family dinner. When asked what he would like for dinner on May 16th, it came as no surprise that bacon was on the menu. However, in true Enthusiast form, he wanted to know about breakfast and lunch – could he have bacon as the main attraction at all three meals? Again, within a certain limit, in this case his birthday, we allowed The Enthusiast to indulge in his passion for bacon without demonizing a nutritionally sub-standard food. In letting go and allowing The Enthusiast birthday glory, we contributed to him feeling good about his eating.

No one is in more control of our household than The Butter-Licker. In Chapter 8 of *Child of Mine*, Satter reflects on Dr. Spock's observation that "toddlers are demanding, assertive, mercurial, pre-cooperative..." - The Butter-Licker has it all covered. As an infant, breastfeeding came more naturally to her than any of my other children. Sleeping did not. It is interesting to note that my pattern of introducing solid foods to my "second born" children was different than the "first born" children. I was more anxious for the younger siblings in the pairs to eat solid food because I so

desperately wanted them to sleep. There was little reflection on my part at the time and I am certain that cues were missed. In reviewing Satter's chapter on sleeping through the night, it is clear now that the problem was behavioral, not nutritional. The Butter-Licker was not waking up because she was hungry; she was simply unable to put herself back to sleep after normal nighttime restlessness. This was a direct result of nursing her to sleep every evening.

Putting children to bed before they are sleeping aids them in their ability to put themselves to sleep, Satter states. I loved that time and was never encouraged not to nurse them to sleep. With the older siblings I had the energy to wake up every four hours around the clock until they were six months old. With the younger children, solid foods seemed to be my only path to rest. It is questionable whether or not the early introduction of solid foods helped as, eventually, The Butter-Licker did sleep through the night; but, as with cessation of The Regurgitator's reflux, it may have been more a result of physical maturity.

The Butter-Licker literally licks the butter off her toast, which until now I thought she did just to annoy us at breakfast. *Child of Mine* brings me to the conclusion that it is actually an indication that she self regulates extremely well. Fat, as Satter points out, is critical in meeting the energy needs of young children. Their stomachs are small and fat provides them with concentrated calories. Quantity is not what The Butter-Licker aspires to; she never consumes large amounts of any one thing. When her calorie requirement increases, she will eat more fat thereby increasing her caloric intake without increasing volume. On page 352, Satter charts information as a guide to helping children eat the right amount of fat. Including a variety of high quality fat options at every meal is important so the child can follow their own signals in satisfying their needs. High quality fat options include low-fat meats, such as turkey, fish, avocados, and vegetable oils – not the types of ingredients you see in the McDonald's Mighty Meal. As Kaufman

points out on page 151, this affordable meal packs more than half the amount of fat a child needs in an entire day. Consumption of this type of fare, that is high in calories, low on nutrition and inexpensive, is one of the main contributing factors to childhood obesity. Fat is not the enemy – it is essential to good health, and when presented as part of a wholesome diet, provides important building blocks for cells and other chemicals in our bodies.

The Butter-Licker could not care less about potential health benefits of fat as she licked the peanut butter off her toast this morning. As Satter points out on page 340, this disassociation between food and health is a good thing. “Children won’t eat what they are supposed to – they eat what tastes good.” The problem is, fast food does taste good. The combination of fat, sugar and salt trigger the pleasure center in our brains and makes us want more. Eating this type of food on a daily basis puts children into a vicious cycle. Once it becomes their normal, per Kaufman, it becomes a struggle to redirect eating. Success in reaching Kaufman’s new normal can only happen with a family-wide effort. It is rarely successful when focused on one individual. Allowing children to follow their internal cues is important, but it is equally valuable not to pressure them into eating “nutritiously and properly.” These lessons are better saved for school age children. But what happens when a child needs to self regulate in a chronically nutrition-poor environment?

Fast food summons our children to overindulgence and ultimately obesity. In *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*, by Greg Crister, Kaufman concurs that the supersized portions bait customers with bargains, drawing them into calorie rich, nutritionally bereft dietary deserts. This more-for-your-money lure costs the industry very little in additional costs as the same labor, overhead, and marketing all remain the same; but the pay-off is big for business, as she points out on p. 152. The Explorer and The Regurgitator have both seen the inside of McDonalds. Like Kaufman’s family, we sometimes used fast food only when healthier

calories were unavailable. The children knew it was not their normal – it was an occasional excursion in an effort not to push the “deny the demon” button too hard. But for families on tight budgets with little time at home to prepare healthful meals, fast food has become the normal and has significantly contributed to the surge in pediatric obesity and type 2 diabetes.

If Ellyn Satter’s *what* is fast food, the *when* is anytime and the *where* is the back seat of a car the child’s ability to regulate the *how much* and *whether* becomes skewed. I have never observed a child eating a Happy Meal say “I don’t like it” or “I’m too full”. Instead, they consume every last batter-dipped, salted and fried nugget in the bag and sip the juice box dry until it crumbles into a vacuumed ball. There is hope, however. As pressure mounts on fast food restaurants to expose calorie counts and provide healthier options, families are beginning to have choices. “As individuals, we can make the better choices no matter where we live”, states Kaufman. Empowering parents to improve the feeding dynamic within their families can reduce the prevalence of pediatric obesity and diabetes type 2. The many examples put forth in *Diabetes* confirm that appropriate nutrition counseling and education can work.

After my workout at our local health club on Saturday, I pulled into *Sonic* with my younger children in tow. The Enthusiast was speechless, as he had been asking to go nearly every time we drove past. At five, he could only guess what the menu offerings would be, but the neon burger and fries atop the restaurant tantalized. I carefully reviewed our choices and announced to the faceless panel that we would have two grilled chicken sandwiches on whole-wheat rolls, two small fries, and two waters. I heard his sigh of disappointment from the back seat. “Bacon, I want bacon on my sandwich.” The Enthusiast got his way that day, as did The Butter-Licker, who had her sandwich dissected before we pulled between the yellow lines.