

April 2016 – Family Meals Focus # 105 - Cultural issues in feeding

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A reader writes that she has been using Pam Estes's Cultural Issues article since it was originally published 10 years ago! It is clearly is time to share it with a new generation of readers.

“You don't need to know all the answers,” Ellyn Satter told me. “You just have to ask good questions.” True to form, in preparing my ESI presentation on Cultural Issues for Maryland WIC, I had locked myself into giving the answers. I felt obligated to give culturally specific guidelines about food selection. I was overwhelmed – how could I possibly become an expert on all that cultural complexity and variety with food?

Consider attitudes; build on tradition

“Don't go there,” Ellyn reminded me. “Look at attitudes. Trust and build on the strengths of the parents. Every culture has food and mealtime traditions or ways of feeding children that give parents a leadership role. Based on the available foods, every society has, through trial and error, put together a nutritious diet and tested that diet over the centuries. If the diet worked, people survived long enough to reproduce. If the diet didn't work, they didn't.”

Feeding relationships in immigrant families

How do feeding relationship issues play out in immigrant families? In San Jose, California, home to a large migrant population, parents gave in to their children's fast-food requests. It broke family budgets. When money ran out and mothers prepared traditional fare, the children complained. The parents felt bad, the grandmothers got angry and the children got scolded for not eating. The fundamental problem for those families was not food selection, but *feeding*.

Immigrant families can follow the division of responsibility in feeding

Following the division of responsibility in feeding make family meals fall into place. Parents can respect their food traditions and take leadership with feeding instead of giving that role over to their children. Rather than scolding their children about eating they can say, in word or deed, “this is what is for dinner. You may eat or not eat.”

- Immigrant parents need to and *are entitled* to take leadership with food selection and maintaining the structure of meals and snacks. Their cultural foods can form the backbone of meal planning. They can also honor their children's longing for Americanization by occasionally having fast food.
- Their children can choose to eat or not eat what they, the parents and grandparents, put before them. Parents do not have to cater to children's food preferences in order to get them to eat.

Remember cultural competency

At some point, every culture had a way of feeding children that resembled the division of responsibility in feeding. A Native American audience objected to the division of responsibility in feeding on grounds that it was “too strict.” “That's not the Indian way,” they insisted. “We don't make our children wait to eat when they are hungry.”

“Let's take a look at the old ways with food and feeding.” Ellyn responded. “Exactly what *is* the Indian way? Letting children raid the refrigerator or giving them change for the trading post is new. How did the elders do it?” The elders in the audience knew: it was a pot

over a cook stove with adults to mind it and a family that ate together when the food was ready.

Parents have trouble taking leadership with feeding

Parents moving from other countries and experiencing great cultural change have trouble maintaining leadership with feeding. They are often ashamed of their food traditions, fearing that those foods are somehow inferior or that their ways with eating are “not quite American.” They learn about American foods and feeding from what they view on TV, see in waiting rooms, or observe when they eat out. Children take advantage of parents’ shame and ambivalence to get the upper hand with food demands.

Nutrition professionals can help parents recover their leadership with feeding, not by giving answers, but by asking questions that draw out competency: What were your old ways with respect to food and eating? Before you came here, how did you manage family meals? How is that different from what you feel you are expected to do now?

Why did parents want Pediasure?

WIC clinics and doctors’ offices were flooded with calls from immigrant mothers requesting Pediasure for their one-year olds. Pediatricians appropriately evaluated growth and reassured parents that their children were growing well. However, parents continued to insist on Pediasure. How did families get the idea that long-term bottle usage and Pediasure is the American way? Possibly from each other, advertisements, or waiting rooms. What about attitudes? Do the parents see Pediasure as the key to making their children eat more and grow bigger? If so, that assumption must be addressed before parents will be interested in exploring their own traditions of teaching children to eat family food.

Support parents in taking leadership with feeding

For children to eat well, parents must feed well. It is wonderful to learn all we can about other cultures. However, we don’t have to be experts on cultural differences in food and food preparation in order to support parents in taking leadership with feeding their children.