

Peggy's Story – This is a Joke, Right?

How am I supposed to give my children something I never got myself? I have no memory of receiving what I understand -- at least at a cool mental level -- is what my children need to be healthy and function well at school. I grew up in a household with lots of drinking, loved in my parents' way, but certainly not nourished as I have come to understand the word.

At a Suppers meeting for people who have blood sugar problems, we progressed through story after story, lesson after lesson on all the steps it takes to get a family off the hook of sugar and other processed foods that make one feel addicted. It was hard to take it seriously because when I grew up I thought I was getting a good meal on the days I got a TV dinner of macaroni, baked beans and spiced apples. Kale? This is a joke, right? Cook? Get my husband to agree? My kids? The message I was getting was that the problems that ran in the family were all related to our love of junk food and aversion to real food.

The cool part of my brain was telling me that acquiring a taste for fruits and vegetables is what has to happen. I could tell from the way my son was around junk food that he had a special relationship with it. He's very ADHD and he sure loves sugar. But the hot part of me was screaming, "This is a joke, right?" When we went to work on nutritional harm reduction, I heard a few practical tips I thought I might actually get away with. First, I had to parent. Just think, I was going to become an adult so that they could be children. All I had to learn was how to exercise appropriate control. The biggest immediate problem was the impulse control issues of my son which, to my amazement, did turn out to be at least partly related to what he ate. We ended up seeing a nutritionist who told me to get him off all sugars and give him small snacks of mostly protein whenever his mood or behavior started deteriorating. She didn't understand all the things that would have to change in our household in order to make this happen, but we started. I had to learn how to plan ahead. I had to buy an insulated snack bag. Fortunately my son was willing to eat a little piece of chicken or a handful of almonds on command; it was the subtraction of favorite foods that was hard on all of us.

It wasn't too difficult getting the family to eat more fresh fruit, but vegetable consumption slowed down after carrots and celery sticks. I went through a period of hiding treats for myself in the car because my kids always found them if I brought them into the house. Eventually they sniffed them out in the car too. Sometimes it's hard to be the adult. I got all the dyes and corn syrup out of my kids' diet. It took a while, but it eventually became clear that my son could hold himself together for almost two hours as long as he did get that protein snack and did not get the junk. It became a routine very quickly, whether he was headed to school, sports practices or a friend's house, he had that bag. But I had to learn to be completely consistent. If I stayed in the routine of packing appropriate snacks, he was OK. When we forgot, we all paid the price. The benefits were so obvious to his school teachers that they cooperated with his unique snack schedule.

This child still has issues, but he is much more retrievable now. Our experience has demonstrated that the more control we exercise when food shopping, the less control we need to contain his impulses at home and school. Life is a lot easier on all of us when I remind myself that "I'm the parent" and I stay in my role.