

# Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

**Dear Kathleen,**

**My seven-year-old son, Nicky, is a picky eater. He hates fruits and vegetables. Every night at the dinner table, we have a battle about whether he will eat. He pitches a fit, and screams so loud that I give in and let him eat a hot dog (one of the few foods he likes besides pizza and cookies). Will he grow out of this? Do you have any suggestions about how to make him eat a better diet?**

**-- Exhausted Mother**

Dear Mom,

You describe a classic example of the ‘tail wagging the dog’ – and I don’t mean the hot dog. You have two serious issues to deal with: 1) Nicky’s diet and, 2) Nicky’s bratty behavior. Let’s start with the vittles.

If seven-year-olds were allowed to select their ideal meals, my guess is that hot dogs, pizza, and cookies would rank high on the menu. A healthy diet is essential for everyone and especially for youngsters who are building brain cells, bones, and muscles at a greater rate than adults. Unless you want your son to adhere to an all-nitrate, all-animal fat diet, hot dogs should be the exception, not the rule, for his supper.

There is nothing inherently wrong with hot dogs, cookies or pizza. These can be reasonable additions to any kid’s diet, but the key here is ‘moderation.’ Nicky’s diet is in need of an overhaul. I doubt that he will grow out of these food preferences without your intervention.

Talk with Nicky, and tell him that you love him enough to make certain that he is eating a healthy diet. Tell him what a balanced diet looks like. No one should be forced to eat something that is repugnant to him or her (okra comes to mind here). But every child should acquire a taste for at least a few items in important food groups. He doesn’t have to like every green vegetable, but he has to eat some.

Take Nicky grocery shopping and give him some choices. Does he prefer broccoli, green beans, or a salad in the green vegetable category? He might not appreciate the finer points of a pomegranate, but an orange or an apple will be part of his diet. Pick one! He may feel some sense of control if you allow him to select the fruits and vegetables that he likes the most (or hates the least). Think of some creative, under-the-radar ways to add these foods to his diet – like a stir fry, spaghetti sauce, or a meatloaf that contains carrots.

You must model healthy eating behaviors. Kids will do what you *do* rather than what you say. Keep lots of healthy foods around and reserve the sweets for special treats. At the risk of making broccoli the bad guy and cake the good guy, I would practice saying, “When you’ve finished your broiled chicken and green beans, you may have some dessert.”

Be conscious of what Nicky eats after school. If he’s been grazing nonstop since he walked in the door, hunger won’t motivate him to eat what you’ve prepared. Eat dinner at the table, and remove distractions. Veggies are no competition for the television blaring his favorite program. Make dinnertime a fun part of the day.

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You are not doing Nicky any favors by letting him scream until he gets his way. By allowing your son to behave in this manner, you will inevitably raise a brat who will turn into an adult who thinks he can bully and yell at others until he wins the battle. Be calm, controlled, and firm. In no uncertain terms, let him know that he is expected to eat the food you've prepared, and that hot dogs have taken the night off.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).