

Listen to Your

FOOD

FOCUS
on
DIET

Bobbi Sheahan



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When you think about the sensory issues in your family, what's at the top of the list?

For many of us, it's food. Sure, there's the way that neither my husband nor I can bear to wear scratchy blue jeans. There's his sensitive hearing and my acute sense of smell (like a dog) and my daughter's imperviousness to pain. There's my klutziness and lack of fashion sense and the way that none of us knows how loudly we are really talking.

But in my family and in my informal survey of other families, those aren't the main event. *Food is.* Food keeps coming up again and again. Food is nourishment and comfort and entertainment. It is celebration and consola-

tion. It can involve multiple senses—taste, touch, and smell. I used to choose foods primarily on the basis of the way they felt. My tastes run toward things that are cold and sweet—I blame my chronic sore throats from sinus allergies. But recently, I learned from my daughter that, at least for her, food involves yet another of her senses. If I'm smart—which is sometimes debatable, I know—I can use this information to expand her limited menu even farther.

For years, my daughter didn't really want to try anything unless it was sweet, smooth, and room temperature. When we did finally get her to branch out, it was first to fruits and then to vegetables. Some of her vegetable choices surprised me because they didn't seem to fit the pattern—until I came to understand that she was focused on the sound of the food, rather than the

taste. For years, she would eat raw cabbage, and I rejoiced, while completely missing what was motivating her to eat it. Not long ago, we got Grace to try lettuce. Now, she insists on calling it “cabbage,” and she has asked for it at dinner 3 nights running.

There was just this one thing I didn't get, though—she scrunched up her face and put her hands over her ears when she ate it. I was afraid to ask her what was wrong and risk losing a food that she would eat in her sparse repertoire, but, finally, on the third night, I couldn't stand watching her eat it like that anymore. It would be so unlike her to eat a food she didn't like, and yet she seemed to be grimacing.

So, I asked her why she made that face when she ate it. She said, “I like the way it sounds when I chew it. It sounds like cabbage, but different.”

I think of this as The Lesson of the Lettuce; in short, maybe I'm missing the point by assuming that I know what is objectionable to my child.

Her siblings were delighted, and they all began to fill their mouths and listen to the sounds of chewing their lettuce together, with their hands over their ears.

So, "lettuce" put all this together. (See how I did that?) When you're dealing with sensory issues, things may not always be what they seem. You may think that your child is rejecting a food because of its taste, when it's actually the texture he finds objectionable. I think of this as The Lesson of the Lettuce; in short, maybe I'm missing the point by assuming that I know what is objectionable to my child.

Maybe it's not just my kids; maybe all of us have our own Lesson of the Lettuce. Your child may be uncomfortable in his classroom because there is a bully in class, or the bulletin

boards are too busy, or it could be something else entirely: the buzzing of the fluorescent lights, a particular smell in the classroom, a temperature issue, or even (as was the case for my husband) the sound of the other kids' pencils scratching along on their papers.

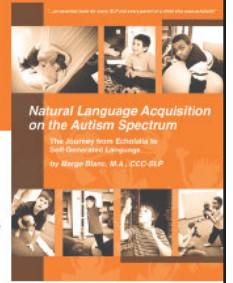
If your child isn't eating her lunch, maybe it's not the food at all; maybe there is something about her lunchbox that she finds intolerable. I still remember the desk that I had one year in elementary school because it was missing a caster on the bottom of one of its legs, and it wobbled. In retrospect, I could have stopped the distracting wobbling with a sugar packet or some duct tape, but it never occurred to me or anyone else to even try.

I hope that we can all use The Lesson of the Lettuce in a broader context: Don't ever hesitate to ask questions about every one of your kids' senses; some solutions may be right under your nose. Or your eyes. Or your ears. ♦

Bobbi Sheahan is the co-author of What I Wish I'd Known about Raising a Child with Autism (Future Horizons, 2011).

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TAMI A. GOLDSTEIN

FOREWORD WRITTEN BY SUSAN VAUGHAN KRATZ, OTR, CST

Tami's daughter, Heather, was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome just before her 13th birthday. Heather spiraled out of control medically and educationally until an occupational therapist helped lead her to a functioning recovery. Tami shares her recommendations for other parents as she tells Heather's story of coming through the fog.

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