

Anxious Eaters, Anxious Mealtimes: Practical and Compassionate Strategies for Mealtime Peace

Introduction

If you have picked up this book you probably know a child, or children who are anxious eaters. These children are worried about eating, pretty “picky” and eat a very narrow diet with very specific foods. They may only eat one brand of macaroni and cheese and may like their waffles round. They may like any food with a crunch, but no wet foods. Their preferred cheese is a particular string cheese, but only white, not yellow! They may like fast food nuggets from only one restaurant and they must be fresh and warm. They may drink milk, but only from their special cup and apple juice from the green box. Their yogurt may need to be one flavor, brand, color and must be eaten directly out of that container, not a bowl! They may have no vegetables or fruits in sight. Your attempts to introduce new foods, different foods, healthier foods, are met with resistance and maybe even tears. There is lots of worry about foods! Parents of these anxious eaters describe their children as well beyond typical picky.

Some children are anxious about ANY type of change at mealtimes. They might become upset when their mother cuts their familiar toast into a different shape. They may reject yogurt if it has been served in a bowl, and not out of the container. Other anxious eaters are really worried about new foods. Every anxious eater experiences their own specific kind of worry. While worry can be seen as the common thread, different children worry about different aspects of eating and mealtimes.

Many of you have already read everything you could find. You are looking for answers. Many of the popular books, parent blogs, and headlines tell you to just relax, to bring your child back to the table and just offer the food your family is eating. Just have that food around and he will eventually try it. Just relax and take away the pressure. And so many of you have tried all those things. You have tried serving family meals, invited your child to the table, had nice mealtime conversation. AND you tell us your child STILL does not try anything new. You tell us if you did not remind, cajole, coerce, bribe, threaten or force your child to eat, he would only eat his favorite crackers. And that it is BECAUSE you love your child and you worry about him that you remind, cajole, coerce, bribe, threaten, or force him to eat. You are told not to pressure! You tell us it is not fair for us to take away the only strategy you have without giving you a new plan, new ideas. Eliminating pressure and having positive mealtimes together are good ideas and an important starting point, but maybe YOUR child needs more. Maybe we need to look at the Big Picture differently for your child.

You may be a parent or you may be a professional. This book is written for both of you. I wanted parents and feeding therapists to have the same information. As feeding partners, we all need to be on the same page, with a philosophy that can help us get to the common goal of helping children who are struggling to eat. The challenge with inviting both parents and professionals to read this book is that it becomes an encyclopedia of ideas, too many for some

and not enough for others. I have tried to share a variety of ideas along a continuum of varying degrees of mealtime worry. Some ideas work for some children and other ideas work for others. I hope readers pick and choose what works for them and the children they love.

The seeds for the foundation philosophy of this book are found in the books I have co-authored with Suzanne Evans Morris. *Pre-feeding Skills*, First and Second Editions, have been books that have influenced feeding therapists and teams for decades. They are based on the belief that feeding is a relationship based on trust, a mealtime dance of communication between the child and parent. I have further described these ideas in the *Get Permission Approach* courses that describes a sensitive, responsive dialogue between child and parent that helps us discover which foods your child LOVES? We look at how can we help children find enjoyment of their foods, confidence in their skills and internal motivation to eat enough to grow and thrive.

At the core of my beliefs about eating is that it is a relationship between parents and their children. Parents nurture both through the calories of food and also through the love with which they offer that nourishment. In a real way, mealtimes nourish both bodies and souls. This philosophy is reflected in the title of this book. When children are anxious eaters, mealtimes can lose their balance. We parents worry when our children are not able to eat the good foods we offer. In our worry, we try HARDER, and in their worry, they push back harder, hence “anxious mealtimes.” Children eat three to five meals a day. That is twenty-one to thirty-five meals a week! That is a lot of opportunities to enjoy mealtimes together, or to be worried about meals together. Many parents tell us they do not enjoy meals, or no longer enjoy cooking. They are preparing more than one meal each night. The new foods they make with the hope of expanding their child’s diet are often rejected. Food is wasted. The stress about the mealtime, the food and the interactions can lead to stress not only between the anxious eater and parents, but also between parents. Siblings also feel the constant anxiety of their parents and brothers and sisters.

In a career that is inching close to five decades, I have met parent after parent who is struggling with the worry, stress, guilt, anger and hopelessness of trying to feed their really anxious eater. I would like to acknowledge right from the start that I understand this is hard work. It is hard work for parents and hard work for children. My bottom line belief is that parents are doing the best they can and children are doing the best they can. Parents want to help their children eat and grow. I believe that generally children want to eat and when they do not, cannot, will not eat, it is our grownup job to try to understand why. What are they trying to communicate with us? What are they telling us about how they feel, how their body works, why they are not enjoying meals? Are we being responsive to their concerns? It is my hope that in this book I can provide some clues about how the mealtime ended up with this worry and what might be done to get back to mealtime peace.

One of the concerns I hear regularly from parents is that progress for these very worried eaters is so slow. “My child has been working on the same goal for a year and still has not added a new food!” We need to find ways that parents can see change and see that light at the end of the tunnel, or at least see the pathway to that tunnel! It is way too discouraging to have a goal of

adding ten new foods to a diet and, a year later, the goal is the same. Something is not working. It is not working for parents and not working for children. Something must change. Hopefully this book offers ideas that can help with that change.

One of the themes of this book is finding ways to help your child get from here to there along a continuum of tiny, tiptoe steps. What is working and what is not working now? What would it take to find a comfortable, happy and peaceful now? We will always start at a familiar and safe starting point. From there, how can we guide your child through tiny, achievable steps toward the there, the goal? Those tiny steps are different for each and every child, for each and every family.

Here

There

But as we think of here to there for children, we also will think about here to there for grownups. Grownups need little steps too. To get from a now of worry, struggle, and maybe even a mealtime battleground, to a mealtime without worry will require change. Einstein is widely credited with giving us the definition of insanity, though it could have been others. The concept is so meaningful, though, regardless of who actually was the author. The quote is that “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.” Yes! To get different results for your child something needs to change. For mealtimes to improve, for therapy to improve, we need to do something different, a different presentation, a different approach, a different offer, a different food, a different attitude, a different set of tiny steps. Something. We know we cannot continue to do the same thing we are doing and expect things to get better. Hopefully this book provides ideas for those tiny steps from here to there that help get those different results.

You will also notice throughout this book that I am always looking for hope, hope for children and hope for parents. When therapists or doctors say Johnny does not do this, and cannot do that and will not do this, parents can get very discouraged. I prefer what I call, the YET terminology. (How about, Johnny is not yet able to chew hard foods, or Johnny does not yet enjoy that texture? Yet gives hope. It reminds us that Johnny is on a continuum of tiny steps from here to there. He is not yet there but is on the way. We all need hope! I have been describing this concept to therapists for years in my courses as a way of writing hopeful evaluations without all those negatives about all the things children cannot do. I am thrilled the educational research and writings that of Carol Dweck, PhD has made these concepts mainstream from her book, *Mindset, the New Psychology of Success* 1 and her “Power of Yet,” Ted Talk™. 2 What she calls the “growth mindset” truly works well with my approach to new food trying and anxious eaters.

We will come back to four principles throughout this book. 1.) We will look together at how to help families get to a starting place of mealtime peace from the often stressful and worried place of NOW. Once parents and children trust mealtime will again be inviting, less pressured and more peaceful, we will want to help children learn to experience change in their mealtimes without tipping them over into their worried place. 2.) We will teach them change happens and

it's okay. 3.) On these important foundations of mealtime peace and change happens, we can help children learn comfortable strategies for new food trying. These strategies can be learned away from the peaceful mealtime and brought back to the mealtime once they are comfortable and established. 4.) And finally, every invitation to the table, every change that happens, every new food trying strategy will all be offered and supported at each child's pace requiring both parent and child success.

Throughout the book I will share my ideas through examples and stories both from my experiences and also from families who live this. Families and children have always been our best teachers if we take the time to really listen. Some amazing parents have taken the time to share their insights from their long anxious eater journey with us. You will see from the experiences shared in the book that I value parent feedback. I believe parents are the center of their child's feeding team. Feeding therapists have ideas from their years of experience, but parents know their child and MUST be heard. It is sad for me when I meet a family who has lost their parent instinct when a well-meaning feeding team has pressured them to go in directions that just did not fit their child, their family or their parent instinct. There will be lots of ways to get from here to there, but first we need to find ways for each child and each family to feel celebrated!

I have written this book as a conversation accessible to parents and professionals. Anxious eaters are boys and anxious eaters are girls. They are infants, toddlers and older children. (They are adults too). The focus of this book is on children, though many of the basic ideas will work well with adults. Instead of referring to all these children as they or them or the child, I have alternated he and she throughout. Because I am speaking to both parents and professionals, I will describe the children in this book as your child. Your child fits for each parent reading it and can also fit for the therapist thinking about the child on their caseload. Your child. I will also refer to feeders as parents. By parents I mean anyone feeding or eating with that child. Parents can be caregivers, and grandparents, babysitters, or the feeding therapists and team members. It is the person who is trying to help your child enjoy food.

Of course, the ideas shared within this book are just ideas. They are not meant to be given as medical advice and must be adapted for each child and each family. There can be underlying factors contributing to a child's reluctance to eat. It goes without saying that those need to be explored with appropriate medical and professional alongside any ideas shared in this book

Many of you have heard of the Grasshopper Story. In fact, I have been called that Grasshopper Therapist. The book is guided by the Grasshopper Story which you will read early on in the book. This story is based on an experience my family had trying grasshoppers in Mexico. The experience gave me some powerful insight on the plight of worried eaters. I will encourage you to think of new foods as grasshoppers to help in your here to there thinking about your child's eating worries. Think of what support you might need to have to try to eat grasshoppers and you will already have a framework for offering new foods to the worried eaters you know.

I encourage you to read through the whole book. It offers hope and suggestions that you and your team can use to surround these children with love and guide them into new mealtime skills. The ideas will need to be individualized for each child. No suggestion fits everyone. Some are great ideas but need to be adapted and others will just not work for the specific child you have in mind. But, read on. I want to help you find perspective on these issues of mealtime. I want to help you consider the mealtime challenges within the big picture of your whole child. I want to help you get back to celebrating your child every day and every meal for all that he is beyond these eating challenges. I want to help you find hope.

Let's begin, Marsha