

Dealing with Eating and Sleeping Issues

Eating and sleep are as natural as breathing. The difference is that we breathe constantly and don't derive conscious pleasure from it (it doesn't reduce a "need"). Human beings eat to reduce a need (hunger) and sleep to reduce a need (tiredness). If left to our own devices, we will eat when we're hungry and sleep when we're tired. So why do these issues become such major headaches for parents? I think the answer is traditional parenting and its focus on control and power.

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It's very interesting to me that babies sleep when they are tired and eat when they are hungry, and adults do the same thing. It's just when parents try to control these natural functions and make a whole series of rules and restrictions around them, that things go pear-shaped. It doesn't have to be this way.

Here are some ideas for dealing with eating and sleeping in an alternative way that parents find to be really helpful, and that automatically reduce conflict and increase family harmony

Eliminate Arbitrary Rules: If you have specific bedtimes, try eliminating them. If your child is old enough, discuss any issues that you have related to sleep in a collaborative and respectful way. Try to be less invested in traditional concepts like meal times and "family meals" – eating problems (including obesity) can arise because of all the rules and "traditions" we force on our children

Let Them Sleep When They Are Tired: Although there may be some adjustment pains, this method always works and it keeps sleep as a good thing and not something to "fight off". Why does it always work? Because human beings get tired and there is a natural, and healthy, desire to sleep. You can certainly do things to foster an atmosphere conducive to sleep (talk softly, play gentle music, read stories, etc.) but at the end of the day, parents can celebrate that their children are learning to listen to their own bodies rather than someone else's arbitrary rules, and will sleep when they are ready. If children stay up too late there will be "natural and logical consequences" as they learn they may not want to feel tired the next day. And if we haven't created an "us versus them" issue, they will even discuss this with us and provide us another opportunity for guidance and loving parenting

Let Children Control Their Eating: Dr. Sarah Lantz, the author of "Raising Chemical-Free Kids" pointed out to me that parents tell their children not to eat when they are hungry because it will "spoil their appetite"...but that's the whole idea! When children have an appetite that's the time they should eat, whether it is "mealtime" or not. When issues of control and dominance are removed, children learn to listen to their own bodies and to eat when they are hungry. Parents can assist this process by buying healthy foods they are comfortable having their children eat. Dr. Lantz recommends having lots of healthy food choices available for children on demand, and this is consistent with helping children develop healthy attitudes about food and eating while at the same time enhancing family harmony