

## upcoming events

All events are held in our San Francisco office. Fees for presentations are \$40/person or \$60/couple. For more information visit our website: [www.symbiosf.com](http://www.symbiosf.com).

### Dealing with Food & Eating Issues

Wednesday 22 July

7:00 pm

Getting kids to eat healthily, on time, neatly, or at all can be a challenge for a surprising number of parents. Success depends on having developmentally appropriate expectations, an understanding of the way your child's temperament contributes to his or her relationship to food and a knack for avoiding power struggles. In this discussion we will present general guidelines for handling food issues based on age and temperament; and we will address questions on a case-by-case basis.

### Preparing for Preschool

Wednesday 05 August

7:00 pm

As kids head off to preschool issues around separations, transitions, social interactions and adaptability can surface in new or familiar ways. This presentation will help parents anticipate their child's needs and behaviors around this transition and have a plan in place for how to respond. We will include time for parents to ask questions and get feedback related to individual concerns.

### Private Presentations

Presentations on any topic for groups of eight or more can be arranged by appointment. These presentations can be done at your home or another space of your choice, or at our San Francisco or Marin locations. For more details, contact us at: [symbio@symbiosf.com](mailto:symbio@symbiosf.com).

# july @ symbio



## q & a

*My 2.5-year-old son is beyond stubborn. His mule-like qualities extend far beyond the realm of normal toddler defiance. I've been around enough toddlers to know he's special in this way; he makes the average two-year-old look like a pushover. But that's not why I am writing this. He's my second, so I've been around the block a bit and can mostly hold my own. The one issue that completely undoes me is his habit of refusing food. My father is five-star chef, my husband has had a subscription to Food and Wine since before we met, I am a fan of almost every type of cuisine on earth and the farmer's market is a weekly ritual for our family. From the day we began dreaming of a family, my husband and I looked forward to sharing wholesome food with our children and teaching them to appreciate a wide variety of flavors. My five-year-old daughter upholds our culinary family values with vigor and adds her own individual flare; her signature watermelon and chocolate salad has been a surprise summer hit in our kitchen. Our son, on the other hand, seems intent on transcending a biological dependence on food. He may not have consumed more than a total of a couple thousand solid food calories in his 2.5 years of nutritional rebellion. I am sure I must be off in my estimation because he has not perished. In fact, he has miraculously held steady in his position just below the forty-percentile*

cool stuff for parents

## Baby Brain



Bay Area Mom, Jackie Ashton, has created an iPhone app that takes the memory work out of tracking your baby's sleep and eating. We thought it was too smart not to share.

Check it out at:

<http://www.babybrainapp.com/>

Download it at:

<http://tr.im/BabyBrainApp>

## sybio

psychological services for families  
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*mark on the growth charts since infancy. By now, his father and I have relaxed our concerns regarding sudden starvation, but we do worry about nutritional deficits over the long term. And it just bothers me that he won't eat. It's not that he hates food; in fact, he's particularly fond of any menu item that will break into small, gooey pieces when hurled over the dinner room carpet or any semi-solid substance that will splatter across a wide area when impacted with an open palm. He just has no interest in using food for nutritional purposes. At this point, ninety percent of his diet consist of grapes, Cheerios without milk, rice crackers and an occasional spoonful of pasta without cheese or butter. Our doctor says he's healthy. His daycare teacher tells me he will grow out of it. My mother is worried he will have brittle bones. My husband thinks the trouble is mostly behavioral. I have tried every strategy I've read about, heard about or could dream up. I've cooked special meals, carved fruit into animal shapes (ever tried to sculpt a tangerine?), and even tried eating in fun places in the house. I know if you tell me I have to start playing classical music or reading poetry to him while he eats I will try it – but I am so discouraged at this point that I hesitate to ask for more advice. Nonetheless, what do you think? Mozart? Pablo Neruda? Should I just relax and buy more grapes?*

Staying relaxed and maintaining your sense of humor about this is a good idea, if simply to avoid the sort of tension that can lead to power struggles. Any self-respecting, stubborn two-and-a-half-year-old would be duty-bound to a hunger strike once he perceives your intense focus on getting him to eat. However, we are with you in thinking that grapes and Cheerios leave a few food groups under-represented. In addition to this valid concern regarding your son's need for nutritional variety, we also want to be sure that he doesn't make it out of his toddlerhood years without learning how to adapt to change. This requires that he learn how to encounter a new idea, practice, or food item and adjust to it even if it does not fit a familiar model for him. Most kids who are picky eaters, and particularly those with the moxy to stand out as stubborn among a peer group of two-something's, tend to need to adjust to new things slowly. It's common for parents to understand that their child will need time to adjust to a new school or a new routine but to forget that he will have the same needs about food. Eagerness to get a child eating will spur many parents to replace a food as soon as a child rejects it, or to lobby for the child to accept the food by extolling its virtues. Neither of these strategies gives a child time or room to get used to a food. In addition to needing time to adjust, many children who have limited menus are very sensitive to tastes, textures and temperature, which adds to the intensity of adjustment required. Both taste sensitivity and the speed at which a child adjust to new things are based on temperament, which means they are hardwired. You won't be able to talk, bribe or sculpt your son into adjusting faster or reacting less to the experience of foods, but you can help him get used to the process of "learning" a food (something he has managed to do already with a limited number of items) and you can help make the process of eating and the subject of food feel good. It's clear you are already committed to the latter, so you will have that on your side. The other good news is that your son is, one way or another, meeting his caloric needs and growing normally. He also clearly has a robust relationship with food and, unfortunate as it may be for your dining room carpet, his interest in playing with food is actually related to eating (we'll say more on this later). All of these things together form a hopeful battery of strengths.

First, start by taking the pressure off; if your son doesn't want to eat, don't force him. Don't try to talk him into it, don't offer to cook him something special or to make repeated changes to the foods on his plate. If your son knows you are set on getting him to eat more, or more of certain kinds of foods, he's likely to become resistant or anxious around mealtimes. Because he's inclined to be stubborn he will likely deal with the anxiety through defiance; but even kids who are usually compliant find themselves in a bind between the discomfort connected with their parent's menu choice and the fear of failing or disappointing a parent. Even offering rewards for eating certain foods can feel like pressure to some kids – it reinforces the dynamic that you and your child are on opposite sides of the table, so to speak, about what he will eat. It is often more effective to let your dialogue about food take the form of a

discussion rather than an instruction or a cheerleading session – this should come naturally in your family. Talk with your son about what foods you do and don't like, and why, and what you notice about how he responds to certain foods. Let your discussion be fun and light-hearted. The point isn't to convince him to eat a particular food; the point is to model a curious and enthusiastic attitude about eating. Right now, your son is probably in the habit of eating just to take the edge off hunger. He will tend to avoid mealtimes because he connects them with feeling pressure and because the experience of most foods is a bit overwhelming for him. Breaking that tension and helping him develop curiosity rather than avoidance depends on creating a pleasant emotional context around food. This effort will be much better aided by your acceptance of his limits, your interests in his tastes (and distastes) and your low-key sharing of your own food experience than by shaped fruit or changing meal spots. In fact, these things are likely to increase the feeling of pressure, and they add more change into the mix. Fostering an air of open acceptance will mean allowing your son to assert his distaste for certain foods in the spirit of open conversation. You have his steady growth curve on your side and you can afford to let him miss a meal or two in the interest of breaking out of the food standoff. You can always fill in with grape and Cheerio snacks between meals if you become worried about calories.

The second important point is to give him time to adjust to foods. For kids who are highly sensitive, the process of adjusting to a food will not begin with eating it, or even tasting it. Your son will need to look at and play with foods before he even begins to consider tasting them, and he will need to be able to do this without pressure to move too quickly. This doesn't mean that you have to allow him to splatter the walls at will; you can set limits around acceptable ways to play with food (you can even do it together). Sanctioning controlled food-play will give your son a model for developing a relationship with a new or a suspicious food without having to jump right to eating it. This is an important and natural progression for slow-to-warm kids. To eat a food without going through this process would make as much sense to a slow-to-warm child as it would to most of us to agree to marry a stranger simply because your neighbor likes him or her. Even when a new item is a food your son will eventually like, it's likely he will only get there if he has time to consider a food, to reject it, reconsider, touch it, push it away, look at it, ignore it, smell it, push it away, taste it, reject it, and look at it for a while again before he gets ready to eat it. This is a delicate process, hard to perform properly under pressure. If you give up and remove a food from the table before this vetting process is complete, he will have to start all over with the replacement and few things will ever make it to consumption. It may help to follow this formula for meal menus: each meal should include one thing you know your son will eat, one item that you are working on introducing (this item may appear over and over for three or four weeks regardless of whether your son eats it or likes it) and one wildcard item. Do not allow him to have seconds and thirds of the item that he likes: once that portion is gone, he can eat the other things on the plate or end the meal.

Finally, when your son does try a new food, be careful about becoming too excited. Remember you don't want him to feel like you are on the "eat it" side and he is on the "food is for sport only" side. If he's excited, match his level. If he doesn't make a big deal of it, you play it cool too. Don't be discouraged if he tries something new and later decides he doesn't like it again: this is a very normal pattern. As long as the pressure stays off he will likely return to it, or move onto another food. In the end, it's all about meeting your son where he is and helping him move forward in his own way. As such, the process of expanding his menu will also help your son to learn how to move through change in general; which is a good skill for a stubborn young guy to have – at least as a fallback.

## Questions

If you have a question you'd like us to answer here, email us at: [symbio@symbiosf.com](mailto:symbio@symbiosf.com).