

Getting Full On Parents, Instead of Food

By Arleta James, PCC

The traumatized adoptee's preoccupation with food starts in infancy. The child in residence in an orphanage sucks on a propped bottle, or holds a bottle of her own within a few months of being born. The same is true of American adoptees who—pre-adoption—resided in neglectful birth homes. Food was the companion, rather than a nurturing parent who held the bottle, and simultaneously soothed the baby with kind, loving words or a lullaby.



Certainly, the background histories of many children adopted from the foster care system are replete with statements about the lack of food available in the birth home at the time the child was removed. Older children can recall having to seek their own food,

Paul and Michael, now 12 and 14, respectively, resided in a birth home (until the ages of 4 and 6) in which both birth parents abused drugs and alcohol. Michael clearly remembers going to a neighbor's home and asking for food. Kindly, this woman would provide sandwiches, milk, and cookies. Ultimately, her reports to children services helped these children enter foster care. Michael recently stated, "I would like to go back and thank her sometime. I don't know what we would have eaten if it weren't for her."

Post-institutionalized children, who enter the orphanage at older ages, offer stories about foraging through garbage for food remains. International and domestic adoptees share many of the same traumas.

These early experiences generate a connection to food that causes infinite battles within the adoptive family! The child, attached to food, is in a constant quest to eat! One way to solve this dilemma is to shift the child's affection from food, to the people providing the meals and snacks—the parents! The child must become more engaged with Mom and Dad, than the sandwich on his or her plate, or the spaghetti sauce simmering on the stove! In essence, we must help the child become "full" of his parents! This requires

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

nurturing with food, instead of fighting over it day after day. ***We want to transfer the comfort the child gets from food to the comfort he can get from his parents.***

Following are some ways to help children get full of you:

If your child recently joined your family as an infant or toddler (or your little bundle of joy is soon to arrive), you need to hold the bottle or feed your young child. This may be difficult. The youngster may resist. Be patient, and keep at it. (Don't make this an aggressive struggle.) Initially, you may only get a few seconds of quality feeding—this would include eye contact, holding the child and the child sucking on the bottle. As the days pass, the time frame will lengthen. After several weeks or months, you and your son or daughter will be enjoying some quality interactions.

Many parents report, "He didn't want us to feed him, so we stopped." Or, "She preferred to hold her own bottle." Much attachment occurs during the process of feeding an infant. So, we don't want parents withdrawing from feeding post-placement. Keep in mind that the child is not rejecting you. The child has no idea that parents are supposed to feed infants and toddlers. You must teach him this essential human relation.

Additionally, you are transitioning the child to new types of formulas and foods. This is an adjustment! Perhaps you can relate to this from your travel abroad if you adopted internationally. Likely, all of the foods you like, or wanted to eat were not available. A very good article that covers this point in detail is Eating Issues in International Adoption.

When children arrive as toddlers or pre-schoolers, the natural inclination is to move them toward independent eating. Certainly, if the child is to enter a pre-school environment, she will need to feed herself at snack time. However, at home, parents can lend balance—there can time for the child to feed himself, and some time for "playing airplane." Children, adopted at older ages, have missed this fun game. So, don't hesitate to engage your toddler as well as your five, six, seven or eight-year-old (even older in some instances) with the spoon entering the hanger!

Along the same lines as above, one great dad used pretzel rods to engage his challenging son. Each, he and his son, placed an end of the pretzel in their mouth. Then, bite-by-bite, they approached the middle where a kiss and hug awaited. Cookies and crackers will do if you don't have any pretzel rods on hand!

Food Creations—Lunch can become a contest to see who can make the "sandwich with the best face." Cookie cutters make for fun with sandwiches as well!

Olive Fingers—put olives on the tip of your fingers. Invite your child to eat them off, one by one. The only stipulation is a few seconds of eye contact before nibbling any of the ten olives.

Make cupcakes—a boxed mix and a can of frosting are quite okay!

Say "Yes, you may have a brownie after dinner." Starting with "yes" creates far less arguments. Overeaters may benefit from a smaller plate. Firsts, seconds and thirds are less food intake, but it won't seem this way to your son or daughter.

Turn off the TV and iPod during meals. Also, no texting or reading newspapers. You must interact in order to fill your youngster up!

If your child hoards, pack up a basket of snacks and place it in his bedroom. Include a nice love note. The child who fears that food won't be available often wakes in the night and heads to the kitchen. When you leave food next to his bed, he "sees" you as soon as his eyes open. What a connection this can make! And, you have control over what food you supply. This helps lessen your concerns about items that may spoil or attract bugs. (Of course, if you don't have leggy insects in the kitchen, likely you won't get any in the bedroom.) Go ahead and give this a try. Within 10 to 14 weeks, your child will actually be eating less. Food issues take time to change—for anyone.

Another variation of the above is to offer your child a fanny pack of snacks. Wherever you go, food won't be an issue. This is also perfect for the son or daughter whose blood sugar plummets mid-morning. Low blood sugar can cause behavioral deterioration. Grazing offsets this condition. If you suspect your child has a blood sugar problem, check with your pediatrician.

Alphabet soup or spaghetti offer endless possibilities!



Make pancakes for dinner and a burger for breakfast—this is sure to get you noticed!

Of course, my favorite (I saved the best for last!) — pop a bowl of popcorn. Gather all the kids. Toss it, piece by piece. See who can catch it in their mouth. Each catch deserves a kiss!

In conclusion, doesn't this sound like fun! Over time, you will see a gradual decrease in your child's need to fill up on food. He will want to get full on you!

If you want more ideas about nurturing with food, see Chapter 5 of *Parenting the Hurt Child*, by Gregory C. Keck and Regina Kupecky.

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