

RUJUTA DIWEKAR

notes for
HEALTHY
Kids ★

and for
parents TOO!!

**ps: milk, veggies &
dal not compulsory**

give them an ipad &
they will eat everything

why did your
snack come back
uneaten?

uuuuuu
dis-gus-ting



NOTES FOR HEALTHY KIDS

Amongst the world's most followed nutritionists, Rujuta Diwekar is a vocal champion of using our common sense and uncomplicating the act of eating.

Combining the latest in nutrition science with the traditional food wisdom from our homes, she advocates a multi-disciplinary approach towards our health. One that is devoid of fads and trends, which the food industry thrives on.

Her books have sold more than a million copies and continue to define the discourse on food and fitness across the country.

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Introduction

i dream of a world where every child is free to play, learn and eat as she likes. If this dream is to be fulfilled, then every child should have access to good food. Food that nurtures and protects the tiny souls and sensitive hearts — and so, this book.

It is an attempt to knock some sense into parents, but then my editor asked me to not be so blunt. So here's how i will put it — the book is an attempt to keep our grandmothers' wisdom alive. The simple and uncomplicated way of living and eating. One of fun and masti, stories and fantasies, vacations and papad.

As the world gets global and 4G arrives on our phones, common

sense seems to be packed off to a place so far that you would come across as a rebel if you even tried using it. On the other hand, constantly rubbing your hands with sanitiser would win approving glances. Eating and feeding young kids out of plastic containers with large cartoon characters is real, not stupid. And it is stupid to actually give your kids food in the silver thali that the grandmom so carefully chose from the limited options available.

‘Everything, even change in behaviour, must be packaged,’ said my Berkeley-educated partner. i snorted in approval. Rarely do i agree on anything with anybody, least of all my partner. i hate the big school types, they bore me to death, but he did have a point.

Over the years, i have seen my clients, friends and even family torture their children over food, only to be tortured in return. What was once a joy and an expression of love has turned into a chore. It’s like an accident: you don’t remember how and what exactly happened but the

damage is there for everyone to see. Similarly, we don't know when and exactly how, but tasteless foods with unpronounceable names and belonging to far-off places have gained a reputation for being healthy. It has nudged out simple, tasty and local foods like ghee-rice, banana-roti, etc. The damage here is the daily drama about food. It's tough to tell who the victim really is: the child or the parent. Both seem to be victimised, one bargaining for extra time on the iPad in exchange for finishing off the food on the plate, the other offering a packet of chips in return for eating two rotis. Now that's a spine-chilling barter, at least for me.

You don't know whether to speak or shut up; either way you are doomed. Much like the shaadi ka laddoo, damned if you do, damned if you don't. Why not a book then, which speaks to you when you are not in the heat of the moment. When you are not saying, drink this milk — it will make you grow taller; eat the dal — it is full of protein; finish your veggies — you need the

greens, etc. One that tells you that you are not alone in this. That you have been systematically cultivated by the food and the weight loss industry, a trillion-dollar market today. It thrives on the fact that 'educated' means someone who has stopped listening to grandmother and has turned to Google for all research.

There you go, random people least interested in your well-being are now a more valuable resource and your mother's words just sound like a rant. 'Arre kuch nahi hota, give her some ghee-shakkar-roti', seems like an attempt to dislodge you from your heightened sense of what is good and bad food for your child. And from your Google rani status of a liberal, global citizen who believes that every child must be exposed to world cuisine, preferably rich in protein and good fats and low on carbs. Aaargh! No wonder then that your little one refuses to eat. She wants food, not nutrients. There, I said it. Food please, and not carbs, protein and fat in certain, specific

proportions. Because by the time your kids grow up, that is going to be the wrong formula to eat; it will get replaced by something more complicated so that your kids feel even more intelligent and brave than you do when you urge them to chew on rucola and beet shreds. You will be left wondering where you went wrong. You will blame yourself for their illnesses, obesity, allergies. All this when all you fed them was 'healthy food'.

To cut a long story short, chillax. Food and eating is bloody instinctive. Your child has a survival instinct and eating will come naturally. i will go to the extent of saying that eating sensibly will come naturally. The question is, will you allow it?

Happy reading and no more food shaming.

Rujuta Diwekar

Mumbai

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Part 1

The Bigger Picture

i hate being made to wait, but this was a CME (continuing medical education for doctors) and they invariably run late. In any case, i didn't have the time to debate in my head whether or not to leave without delivering my talk. The speaker on stage had gripped my attention and he was talking about parenting being an opportunity; specifically, four kinds of opportunities: the opportunity to create health, education, mistakes and technology, in that particular order.

Often, i have wondered how to describe a healthy child. Height and weight charts don't seem to do jus-

tice to the definition of health, nor does just being good in school or active in sports. But looking at parenting as an opportunity seemed to answer it for me — a healthy child is one who thrives in an environment of good food and love, goes to school, is allowed to make mistakes and has access to technology that is regulated by parents. The environment in which the child grows up also formed the basis of one of the largest studies ever undertaken by EU, the I.Family project. This was essentially to look at the factors that determine a child's susceptibility to obesity and non-communicable diseases, and then to come up with interventions that would lead to long-term healthy changes (more on this later).

Childhood obesity is now being looked at as a global public health crisis, which, if left unattended, unaddressed, could spell doom for our future and future generations. The problem is not so much about just being overweight but about the host of illnesses that it brings — diabetes, heart diseases, cancer, to a

name a few — and the premature deaths and low quality of life that go with it. And while this is bad news, the good news is that all this is preventable. But for prevention, we have to look at children as a collective, as a public resource that all of us are responsible for. And know that parents are not solely responsible for the health of their children. We have to rise above our differences and as people, policymakers and governments, we must work together to ensure a healthy future for our children.

THE HEALTH OF YOUR CHILD IS NOT JUST YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

If our children are not unhealthy or overweight, it's a shocker — our green spaces are shrinking, our pollution levels are rising, big food giants are gunning for our kids with contests, ads, toys, and we still feel that it is either their personal failure or our parenting failure that they are fat. Relax, it's not.

For too long we have looked at obesity as what it is not — a personal problem brought about by a lack of will power, overeating or laziness around. When we subject children to this kind of understanding of health, we make things worse for them. A child doesn't get fat or unhealthy in isolation; all that you see in them is a representation of what is happening around them. *Bramhanda* to *pinda* and vice versa, as the Upanishads explain — all that you see in an individual is a reflection of all that there is in the universe or his environment. The fact is that we are raising children in an *obesogenic environment* — you could walk to school, your child is driven; you played downstairs for three hours every single day, your child doesn't or plays at the club maybe over the weekend; your mother made you hot nashta, your kid is eating cereal with milk or drinking juice or just going to school without food.

Being a parent today is riddled with challenges that were until recently unknown to mankind. i

mean, when you and i were growing up, or even until fifteen years ago, if you did something wrong, you were at fault, not your parents. If you got hurt, if you got scolded in school, it was all your fault. Your parents called the shots, you suffered them — well, you know what i mean. If you came back saying that your friend is going to the US so even you want to go, your parents told you to go to hell. Today, they are looking at EMI options for Miami Disney World. Other than your birthday or on the day you stood first in class or came home to announce that you were the school captain or till you were down with flu, no one at home did anything to please you. They loved you, yes. But no one serviced you. Everyone went on with their lives, and you were integrated into the eco-system — not vice versa.

But today, even if your child has a runny nose, it's your fault. There's something that you haven't done. Haven't refilled the sanitiser or given them a protein-rich diet or something. Children today,

unfortunately, have been turned into consumers whose approval we must constantly seek. And yet, they are only tiny little beings who are entirely dependent on us. From sucking, to potty, from food to security, from schooling to recreation. In management classes, it is taught that the customer is not always right, and sometimes businesses have to tell customers what they want. In a way, i think that matches the definition of a healthy child. As a parent, you have the opportunity to create health, education, mistakes, technology — essentially, to define specifically what each one of them means for your child. Basically, you get to tell them what they want as food and exercise in order to have health, the primary need for a happy child.

Empowering, isn't it? And yet, today, as parents, empowered isn't exactly how we feel. The doc went on to give the example of one of his patients, a little eight-year-old boy who was brought to him by the parents, because they feared that he had an attention deficit prob-

lem. One of the boy's friends was shifting school because his parents were divorcing. The boy came home and asked his thirty-something father, 'What's a divorce?' The father came back home early the next Friday, took him to the Bandra family court, and gave him all the possible stats on divorce. How many happen every year, how many are initiated by women as compared to men, how different religions in India have different laws for divorces, etc. And then the father complained to the doc that, though he had done all he could to explain divorce to the child, the child seemed distracted, disinterested and even cranky at the Bandra court. All the child sought, explained the doc, was reassurance — 'Your mother and i are not divorcing, you will never have to change school'. Instead, he had received the most up-to-date information on divorce; that's not what he was seeking, and thus the lack of attention. We are complicating the smallest of issues because we want to be our kids' friends, not their parents. Being a parent is an opportu-

nity; we must not let it pass. There's plenty of time to be friends later. For now, be a parent; lead, guide.

SCOPE OF THE BOOK

In India, we are facing a unique situation — we have the highest number of underweight and malnourished children in the world, the second-highest number of obese kids in the world, and let's not forget that we are also the diabetes capital of the world. While we have successfully brought down infant mortality and maternal deaths, we are still not fully equipped in our heads or in our policies to address the issues of obesity and non-communicable diseases that we are facing. Even at the government level, we feel that obesity is a marginal problem limited to the elite — it is not. As demographics shift, the underprivileged and poor are more exposed to obesity and its health and economic costs; the rural to urban migration makes previously malnourished kids obese quickly, but the underlying issues of malnour-

ishment or under-nutrition continue.

And while i hope that our policy-makers and governments take note of the fact that childhood obesity is not a lifestyle issue but brought about by political and policy failure, it's imperative that we as people and parents do not reduce it to a carbohydrate, protein, fat, calorie, portion-size problem. Seeing the issue as it exists is step one to addressing it, wouldn't you agree? That doesn't make food- and nutrition-related conversation completely useless for our children's health, but in fact more relevant than before.

So for now and in the scope of this book, we will focus on good nutrition (and also exercise and sleep) and how it affects the quality of our life. It will be about how food can be used effectively to lay down the foundation of growth, development and sustainable health and well-being for our children. And to acknowledge that health is the only thing that we owe them. And that if we have passed down the

means of earning health, then, with their efforts, exposure and expertise, they can earn and enjoy all the wealth they want.