

PARENT STORIES

From our counsellors

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“RIDING THE STORM”

It is Saturday evening. After an afternoon of havoc and mayhem, I am standing in our bathroom before my six year old, red-faced with rage. This 'showdown' is the finale of an entire afternoon of destruction where my first born, oblivious to the growing list of consequences has gone from one awful act to another.

*I concentrate on taking long, deep breaths and trying to calm myself down. As I breathe in and out, my thoughts continue to tumble over each other. Who is this child? Where has my easy-going boy gone? This is not the kind of mother I want to be... but imagine if **this** child lived with me all the time!*

That was not the first time that food intolerances transformed my son into someone I didn't know. On this occasion it struck me very clearly that if I had not known about food intolerances¹ my experience of mothering him would have been completely different. I can only imagine how much worse the situation might have been if I hadn't understood how food impacted on his behaviour.

At times like these my strategies are simple and well-rehearsed. The first thing is to reduce the stimuli my son is receiving. Immediately I dim the lights, turn off the TV and any music that is playing, and limit conversation. I also reduce the chemical load in his food and his environment. When he eats, I restrict foods to ones I know suit him and try to ride out the storm. This "detox" - as I call it - for him takes about three days, three *long* days.

Food intolerances transformed my son into someone I didn't know

The problem is that sometimes I am deep into the storm before I recognise that it is not just a discipline issue I am dealing with but rather a food issue. Once the realisation hits, an investigation begins that can rival a forensic analysis. What did he eat? Who gave it to him? How much has he had?

That horrible Saturday was brought to us by fruit strips. Organic, no-added-sugar fruit strips. Usually he only gets these once a week, but on this occasion communication had lapsed and both his father and I had given him a second one as a "treat". Four fruit strips over a 24 hour period had "treated" us all to temper tantrums, property damage and insomnia.

¹ Food intolerances are triggered by food chemicals which cause reactions by irritating nerve endings in different parts of the body, rather in the way that certain drugs can cause side-effects in sensitive people. (RPAH Allergy Clinic 2006)

As my son returns to being “himself”, he is sad as he deals with the consequences of the rampage: broken toys, torn books and more. I am also wracked with guilt because I did not manage his diet better... again. At times it is difficult to decide if allowing the natural consequences of the behaviour to play out is the right thing to do, or if it is just cruel.



As my son has gotten older it has become much easier; he understands that if he is going to a party at the weekend he needs a low chemical food week before and after, then he can eat whatever he likes at the event. He is moderately sensitive to salicylates² and amines³ and intolerant to wheat.

He has become resigned to his very restricted diet and understands the need to spread the exposure to some foods over a number of days. He has learned that his food intolerances are about dose – how much and how often he gets the food – and that he can tolerate one exposure every three days.

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However once he has an exposure things change: he gets cravings, starts begging for more, nagging, pestering and lying to people by saying that he is allowed the desired food. At times he has tried stealing the restricted but desired high chemical food.

I try to manage this by removing all opportunities for exposure and re-explaining our need to work as a team when it comes to deciding when foods he can eat. Once he is back on track I reward his cooperation with extra book readings or trips to the park - all non food-related!



Our journey towards understanding the impact of food on my son’s diet started when he was 18 months old. He had been having recurring sinus infections and ear aches, requiring multiple antibiotics - sometimes 15 courses in a year. While on antibiotics he behaved poorly, did not sleep and I usually put it down to him being ill.

Then I asked our GP if I could give my son adult antibiotics and bypass the colours and flavours of the child ones. When we changed antibiotics my son returned to his usual self, in spite being unwell. Once we were alerted to the fact that

² **Salicylates** are a family of plant chemicals found naturally in many fruits, vegetables, nuts, herbs and spices, jams, honey, yeast extracts, tea and coffee, juices, beer and wines (RPAH Allergy Clinic 2006)

³ **Amines** come from protein breakdown or fermentation. Large amounts are present in cheese, chocolate, wines, beer, yeast extracts and fish products. (RPAH Allergy Clinic 2006)

chemicals seemed to have an impact on his behaviour we began noticing that time and time again there were clear links.

Too many doses of food that he is intolerant to can make this small boy physically unwell or change his behaviour. We now know that his reactions depend on the category of food: for example wheat gives him sinus, amines keep him awake, salicylates make him defiant and belligerent.



Many people outside our family find it difficult to understand that healthy foods like oranges and summer berries can be problematic to my son (who of course often craves these). I can recall many conversations with other people, trying to make them understand why I refuse him something like cucumber. I get very tired of trying to explain his food intolerances over and over. Even thinking about the food juggle is exhausting for me, so I try to keep it to a minimum.

Most of the time I conserve my energy by giving a brief statement such as “It does not suit him” or “I encourage him to love food that loves his body”. I accept that some people think this is all weird, especially as my son is quite placid. To those who haven’t seen the effects the wrong food can have, it is inconceivable to imagine him crazed on chemicals, speaking incessantly and unable to sleep until 2am.

Parenting a child with food intolerances adds a different dimension to the whole experience. At times it is apparent that his behaviour is not a result of him trying to assert his independence or pushing a boundary, but rather a reaction to stimulation of over-sensitive nerve endings. It is then time to start deciding which behaviour management strategies to try to reduce the harm! .

As food intolerances run in families, often, you may be chemically overloaded yourself or dealing with more than one child reacting. Food intolerances have led to some diabolical events with our extended family. Once the cause of the issue is identified, it is important to shift into a strategy to manage the situation. This is not the time for teaching, explaining or family meetings. That would be like discussing flu prevention to someone with a high fever.

Regardless of the critics, my resolve is firm, all this effort with food is worthwhile as it enables my son to be himself and thrive. The books I have read say a child with food intolerances can be irritable. In my experience that is a huge understatement - my son can be unrecognisable! When the going gets tough I try to remember my child is in there (somewhere) and will return when the storm passes. I have heard it said that when children are at their worst, parents need to be at their best. How true this is! I have found that when you have food intolerances yourself and produce children with food intolerances you get plenty of opportunity to put this challenging adage into practice!

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