

JUNK FOOD JUNKIES

by Betsy Block



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The Dinner Diaries

Editor's Note: *In The Dinner Diaries, Betsy Block chronicles her family meal makeover, which entails eating more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and eat-*

I don't want to learn more if it's going to make me not want to eat, okay?" Zack warned me one afternoon last fall when the two of us were driving to his drum lesson.

We were still near the beginning of our makeover, and when he said this, I kind of shuddered. He was letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that he would be resisting progress every single step of the way. "I love food and I don't want you to wreck that."

Andy and I love food, too; it's just that we love our kids more. But what we see as life enhancing—serving less meat and dairy, using a fish list, eating with the seasons—smells suspiciously like deprivation to Zack and Maya. "We're doing this makeover because we care about you so much," I reasonably explain. "No, you're doing it to torture us," Zack replies, only half kidding. But of all the changes we've made since

ing less meat, refined sugar, and bad fats. We asked her what was the hardest thing to contend with during the makeover. Snacks, she said, take the prize, hands down.

that ominous moment of foreshadowing by Zack, none has been more difficult to contend with than snacks.

Technically, snacks are just food eaten between meals; a little nosh meant to tide a person over until lunch or dinner. That shouldn't be too hard to manage. Besides, eating five or six small meals a day is actually much healthier than three big meals a day, especially if the heaviest is served at nighttime.

But realistically? Snacks are the bane of my days. That's because I believe that, no matter when or even where it's eaten, food should be nourishing. Meanwhile, Zack and Maya just want anything crunchy, salty, or sweet; if it's full of bad fats, too, so much the better.

That's why, for years now, the kids and I have been playing a little game each day after school: "Can we have potato

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chips," one of them will ask, and I'll respond with, "How about some fruit." Maya: "I want something from the snack closet," and she'll open the door to the cupboard and pull out a bag of chips. I'll cock my head and try to figure out where they came from, because I don't remember buying them. Then I'll realize, that's because I didn't; Andy did. I'll take a moment to collect myself, then I'll frown and say no a little more loudly than I'd intended, which means I'm not only robbing the kids of what they see as their rightful snacks but also giving them a crabby mom to boot.

This can't go on.

As I think about it more, though, I realize that children are not foie gras geese to be force-fed, even if it's with ideas about "good nutrition" by their "loving mother." They're their own people. I want to guide, not bully. Besides, bullying doesn't work. I know because I've tried. Instead, I'm going to have to meet them where they are. Isn't this what good parenting is all about? Constantly finding the middle ground between what we want for our kids and what they want for themselves? But I still need Andy on board, and before I can state my case to him, I need to engage in a little journalistic fact gathering.

"I know you love potato chips," I begin, trying to ease my way into the subject, but he immediately cuts me off with, "No, I don't."

"You don't?"

"No. You do." He's right; I do. But I've

mostly stopped eating them, because I'm trying to set a good example and all that. Plus, now that I've learned about the glycemic load and I understand why they're so bad, I really do crave them less often. "You don't love chips, too?" I ask, amazed. "Then why'd you buy them?"

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"Because she," and here he nods his head in Maya's direction, "wanted them." Seeing my face darken—what if *she* wanted a new toy every day, hmm?—he quickly adds, "I'd already said no to about a hundred things.

She wanted fruit leathers, juice boxes, cookies—it's not easy when she's there."

Fair enough. A few days before I discovered the chips, Andy had taken Maya shopping while I stayed home with Zack and we worked and watched TV, respectively. I have no right to complain. But I can still nudge.

"That makes sense," I say soothingly. "It's just that, if we have them in the house—"

"I know. I'm trying."

I nod sincerely. He really is. In fact, we all are, and we have a healthier and more varied diet, lower cholesterol, better moods, and just a touch of weight loss to show for it.

But life is full of compromises, and so, when we're planning a summer barbecue with friends, who's the one to suggest we buy sweet potato chips? Me, because while I'm well aware they're rife with fat and salt, they're also chock-full of vitamin A.

If into every life a little junk must fall, at least we can try to make it better junk. ■