

“Help! My kids won’t eat anything good for them”

Mealtimes can be a real battleground. So we sent TV nutritionist Gillian McKeith to help out one family

Words: Maxine Clayman Photographs: Thomas Skovsende

Every parent knows feeding the family is no easy task. There’s always something they turn their noses up at, especially children, who are notoriously fussy. This can make it hard to ensure they get a balanced diet.

Meet the Brown family

Carole Brown and husband Alan, both 43, live in Crawley with their two children, Aimee, eight and Marcus, 12. Alan works days and Carole evenings, so with both parents out of the house at different times, they face problems disciplining the kids with regards to food.

Carole says, ‘I end up making different meals for all the family. I know what they should be eating but getting them to eat it is another matter. I’m at my wits’ end and it’s often easier to give in. I just want some help to get them on the right track.’

To enable nutritionist Gillian McKeith to see what they eat, the family has kept a food diary over the last seven days.

Family feuding

Mum says: I’ve tried to give the kids healthy food but when I do they often throw a tantrum.

Gillian says: As tempted as you might be to give in to keep the peace – don’t. If they refuse to eat what you have prepared don’t argue, but don’t offer them something else.

Your child won’t starve before their next meal. Eventually they will eat what they’re given when they get hungry enough. It might be difficult, but be firm, be patient and don’t give up.

Five-a-day

Dad says: Aimee won’t eat any vegetables (other than roast potatoes); Marcus only likes peas and carrots, and neither of them eat much fruit.

Gillian says: Take the children shopping with you and encourage them to look out for unusual varieties of foods that you can cook up together at home.

Serve up the same veg consistently, even if they leave it the first time. Children take a while to adapt to new tasting foods but

with gentle persistence they will learn to accept some of them. They won’t like all fruit and vegetables, so spend time finding the ones they do.

Snack attack

Mum says: The children love eating junk food and I find it hard to stop them.

Gillian says: Limit snacks and sweets to once a week. Never use food as a reward. Try using healthy but fun activities, such as ice-skating, going to the park or swimming, as a treat instead. (And make

DO take the children shopping with you and encourage them to look out for unusual foods that you can cook up together

sure they exercise regularly indoors if they can’t go outside, such as dancing to music.) If they want a snack give them a healthy alternative. Nuts and raisins are great for energy. Try slicing sweet potatoes into wedges and baking them in the oven instead of crisps. And cut down on their intake of fizzy drinks – substitute them with fresh juices, smoothies or water.

Remember children can only eat junk food if you buy it for them. And if you’re worried about them buying junk food at school – don’t give them any money.



The Brown’s food cupboard before Gillian gets to work

Marcus, Carole, Aimee and Alan hope Gillian can change their bad eating habits



...so what next?

It’s all well and good being given expert advice, but sticking to it is another matter. And the Browns will need to make some serious lifestyle changes if they are going to take our expert’s suggestions on board.

Gillian agrees it won’t be easy for the family. ‘At the moment it seems as though the kids rule the house,’ she says. ‘They shouldn’t be dictating what the family eats. They may not want change and may have tantrums, but you’ve got to be tough. It’s for their benefit, as otherwise you’re setting them up for ill health in the future.’

‘Talk to the children,’ she continues, ‘and educate them by explaining what will happen to them if they don’t eat properly.’

With both mum and dad working different shifts it’s important they support each other.

‘Back each other up at consistent mealtimes and eat dinner together at the table,’ she advises.

Emotions ran high during Gillian’s visit. More tears and tantrums could be in store as Gillian keeps a motivating eye on the family’s progress.

‘Aimee and Marcus promised me they’d eat a piece of fruit and a portion of veg every day for a week,’ she says. ‘It won’t happen overnight, but if they work together they’ll see the difference.’



DON’T make threats with food. Discipline them by taking something else away eg. no PlayStation if they don’t do as they’re told



Gillian talks about healthy eating options

We will do our best

‘This has been a real wake-up call,’ says Alan. ‘It was only when we started writing down what we ate that we realised just how bad our diets were – until then I’d always thought I was relatively healthy!’

The family realise it won’t be plain sailing but they are determined to make a go of sticking to the guidelines that Gillian has given them.

‘I’m not looking forward to eating lots of fruit and vegetables,’ says Aimee. ‘But I’ll do my best.’



Gillian McKeith’s latest book *Ultimate Health Plan* is in Tesco stores now. For more details on the TV nutritionist see www.drgillianmckeith.com

Gillian’s Top tips

■ Colourful food is more appealing for kids. Let them help you make a fun fruit salad, for instance, using lots of different varieties cut up and arranged into a face.



■ Check food labels and opt for low-fat and low-sugar brands – you can even get jams that don’t have any added sugar.

■ Experiment with texture. Your child may not like boiled carrots, for example, so try mashing them – the creamy texture could make all the difference.

■ Get them to eat fruit by making smoothies in a blender. SWAP ice-lollies for home-frozen smoothie ones.



■ Encourage your children to help you in the kitchen – they are much more likely to eat and enjoy food they have made themselves.

■ When time allows, let them help pack their school lunchboxes – another great way to get them involved in the kitchen. SWAP sweets and chocolate biscuits for mini boxes of dried fruit, nuts and seeds or oatmeal cookies.

■ Fish can be a tricky food to get children to eat. Meaty white fish, such as haddock, has a milder taste. Try fish cakes, too, for a child-friendly option.

■ Go for brown and wholewheat foods. SWAP for brands that simply include more wholegrains if the kids refuse to eat the brown varieties.



■ What child doesn’t love tomato sauce? Putting lots of finely chopped vegetables – carrots, celery and onion for example, into a delicious homemade sauce is a great way to get extra veg into their diets.

Next issue

Did the Brown family follow Gillian’s advice...?