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2019

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Recommended Citation

Andrade, G. (2019). Kids eat up the old switcheroo. Retrieved from https://docs.rwu.edu/fcas_fp/354

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Kids eat up the old switcheroo

GLENNA ANDRADE



I once saw a book titled "Eat This, Not That!" that gave a dieter some alternate selections to lose weight. However, this title also applied to the eating choices of my children as they grew up.

Definite choices began when my firstborn tasted apricot baby food. Afterward, Kevin would shake his head "no" until his oatmeal was doctored with fruit. When my husband sat in front of the highchair to insist on plain cereal, Kevin's rebellious sputter sprayed his white shirt. Who knew that bibs were intended for the feeder as well as the eater?

Later, as my family grew to three children, I had to get smarter. When the children refused the tips of a banana on their cereal, I pointed out that the ends looked like little castles. Unfortunately, there were only two, so each morning they quarreled over the privilege of eating the little castles.

One time, when my youngest refused to wash his hands before dinner, came up with a choice. "I'll make a deal with you, Keith. You have to wash only one hand." As he scampered to the sink, the two other kids smothered their giggles. But the plan worked.

Then, to get the children to eat different foods, I got inspired again. The old "eat your broccoli to get curly hair" didn't work very well, so I tried a different tactic, the old switcheroo. "That's not really broccoli," I insisted innocently to Karen. "See the trunk and the leaves? They're really miniature trees." She smiled and tasted, not really convinced, but willing to go along.

Substitutions became a routine. Carrots were not carrots, but orange swords. Peas were no longer peas, but cannonballs, although that presented the problem of the kids flicking them at one another, hoping to see an explosion.

Eventually, they learned to sneak anything they disliked under their uneaten mashed potatoes. But it was a dead giveaway when Karen jumped up after dinner to enthusiastically scrape her plate!

As the children grew into teens, they became very helpful, but only to their quiet advantage. They were more than willing to carry groceries into the kitchen and help unpack: They'd learned the old switcheroo tactic. One day when opening the lower cabinet for dog food, I found a box of Oreos. Another time, my vacuum retrieved the potato chip bag that was stashed under Keith's bed.

As a teen, Karen always volunteered to cover the leftover takeout pizza with aluminum foil. It was only a year later that the boys figured out that any plate labeled "cat food" wasn't that. Foiled again!

When the refrigerator was stacked with leftovers, I had to get creative. Soon after the family visited a smorgasbord for the first time, I presented all the leftovers, letting each child pick his or her favorites. My oldest son exclaimed, "We're having a 'borgesmorg!'" The name stuck for many years.

Another treat for the children occurred when my husband and I went out to dinner on Friday night. Two new-to-the-market creations were offered only on these Friday nights. They'd beg for either macaroni and cheese (only in the blue box) or the original kids TV dinner with a pirate theme. I felt like a pirate, too.

To add "spice" to my dinner offerings, I'd sometimes deliberately mispronounce words when a child asked what was for dinner. "FROOit," I'd say with a smile, "and veg-e-TAB-les." Most of the time, they'd frown until they figured it out, and then laughed.

However, the best switcheroo happened one day when Keith swaggered through the kitchen after his day at junior high. "So, Mom," he said. "What's for dinner?" The two older ones looked at me with big eyes.

"Well, let me think. We're having bloody cow with fungi and pot-a-TOES."

"Nope, I'm not eating any of that, thank you."

The two other children burst out laughing, and Keith slunk off to his room.

So, these were some of the choices of “eat this, not that” that my three children suffered under the switcheroos of a creative mom.

— *Glenna Andrade is a freelance writer from Portsmouth.*