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Do not panic! It's common for children – especially teenagers – to have strong opinions about the foods they eat. So, how do you feed your family (without becoming a short-order cook) when one of your offspring decides to become vegetarian or vegan?



Twelve months ago my youngest daughter, Georgia, who was 13 at the time, made a shock admission: she had become a vegetarian.

It was an odd choice. I am not a vegetarian, my husband is not a vegetarian and no one in our extended family is on a plant-based diet. Quite the opposite – family barbecue's resemble medieval Viking banquets – lots of red meat and red wine with everyone scrabbling for the last charred sausage on the plate.

Meal adjustments

Georgia has always been a part of this ritual, so when she announced her plans, I wondered how it would work. As a busy working mum I was not inclined to offer 'the vegetarian option,' and I certainly didn't fancy trekking around town sourcing meat substitutes in speciality shops.

But Georgia was persistent and pretty soon the whole family unwillingly relinquished lamb chops for lentil fritters.

While it pleased Georgia to see her carnivorous dad munching on tofu stir-fry, it eventually drove our family to despair. After several weeks, observing my husband and 16-year-old daughter salivating over our dog's 'woof woof' bones, and hearing one too many snide remarks by her sister, "Georgia ... chickpeas have feelings too you know," I reintroduced meat.

I remember the day well. My eldest daughter called almost glumly and asked what was for dinner. "Crumbed chicken," I announced. Squealing, she put her hand over the phone and whispered to her dad, "We're having crumbed chicken tonight, Dad. Yay!"

Georgia, on the other hand, was not impressed by the sudden departure from vegetarian fare and 'upped the ante' by informing us she was not just a vegetarian, but now also a vegan. Her vegan diet meant she would no longer consume any food using animal products.

Up to this point, my only interaction with vegans was my brother-in-law's ex girlfriend – a tall French girl who nearly gagged when I told her I put a little chicken stock in her soup. Now my daughter had joined the ranks of what I dubbed 'the fussy eaters.' How did this happen?

Apparently Georgia's conversion came about after her school friend had sent her a link to a confronting YouTube presentation, 101 reasons to become a vegan. The impact was profound and immediate. The following day Georgia bounded into the kitchen proclaiming, "Mum, I will never drink the milk of a lactating cow ever again." OK then.

Searching for guidance

While I worried about her dramatic about turn and how obsessed she might become, psychologist and author of *The Bonsai Child*, Judith Locke, assured me it was perfectly normal for teens to have their own thoughts on where food comes from and the impact this has on animals.

"It's good for your daughter to be thinking about issues larger than herself," Judith assured me, hastening to add a disclaimer.

"Parents should also be saying to their children. 'You, come up with a common-sense plan on how you are going to keep your bones developing and your body growing with the right nutrients and I'll come on board.'"

She also stressed the importance of maintaining family unity and for other members not to pay out on the vegan child. "It's not an 'us and them' situation," she pointed out.

All good advice, but I was worried about Georgia's diminishing frame – which had nothing to do with her choice to become vegan but rather by her misinformed meal planning. Her dinners now resembled that of our guinea pigs. So I called in the big guns again.

Tips for vegan eating

Dietitian and nutritionist, Jessica Bailes, volunteered a few of her top tips.

- Consult a dietitian to assist in putting together a meal plan.
- Get Georgia involved in the planning, preparing and cooking of meals, which should include meat options such as legumes, nuts, and tofu.
- Get regular height and weight check-ups and run blood tests to see if iron or B12 levels have dropped.
- Encourage Georgia to have fun with food that's not always that nutritious like chips and chocolate (this doesn't take much convincing).

- Ensure Georgia has a variety of other hobbies - it's not all about food.
- Supplement her diet with vitamin B12.

On a very practical level, whole food nutritionist Fiona Halar suggested I stock our pantry with the basics: tofu, tempeh, and polenta, mixed beans such as cannelloni and kidney beans. She also recommended keeping diced fruit and vegetables in the fridge.

Drilling down the to the daily grind, she says breakfast could be a wholegrain cereal with soy milk; a lunch box could be filled with vegetable sticks, hummus and falafel; and dinner is whatever side dish the family is eating with a protein substitute.

“The upshot of a vegan diet is the reduced risk of disease, the ethical issues and it's good for the environment,” notes Jessica Bailes. “The downside is that restaurants don't always cater for vegans, and parties and other social events can also prove to be problematic if your child is the only vegan.”

The upside?

I have a hunch this is about to change. Google “vegan” and a plethora of websites, Facebook pages, support groups and articles appear.

Author of *Vegans are Cool* Kathy Divine believes this is the way of the future. She reckons half of Hollywood has become vegan. Just recently Liam Hemsworth announced his conversion, joining a long line of celebrities, politicians and former US presidents who have all made the switch. Bill Gates has also invested \$100 million into creating plant-based meat.

While ABS statistics still confirm we are a meat-eating nation, Kym Staton, Founder of The Sydney Vegan Club states 50-80 people join his Facebook site each week. He also notes the changes in our community. “You only have to look at the number of vegan eateries in Sydney and the vast range of vegan products now being offered in supermarkets to confirm this is a fringe movement that's gaining traction.”

So what's for dinner tonight? ... Hmm ... Facon (fake bacon) and soy-sages!