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Christine Gross-Loh, **Parenting without Borders**

INTRODUCTION

We all want the best for our children, but what does that mean? Robert LeVine, an eminent Harvard anthropologist, determined that parents around the world universally share three goals in raising their children. The first goal is survival and health: Parents want their children to stay alive. For those who live in societies where they can be reasonably sure of being able to meet children's most basic survival needs past infancy, though, the second universal goal is to raise children who will have the basic skills they'll need to sustain themselves economically once they grow up. And finally, there's the goal of self-maximization—of raising a socially competent child who possesses the cultural values that are considered important, and who will succeed in that society: *a child who will thrive.*

I didn't know if I would ever have a child. Pregnancy didn't come easily to me, and my husband, David, and I experienced the heartache of infertility before conceiving our first baby. But I always loved children and longed for the day I might become a mother. When I finally became pregnant, survival was a question: I hemorrhaged so severely in my seventh month that doctors told us the pregnancy was in danger. It wasn't until tiny Benjamin was born and safely in my arms, when I looked at his face with his wide brown eyes, mop of black hair, and the puzzled

expression that elicited such fierce protectiveness inside me, that I started to think about what kind of parent I would be and how I could best raise a child who would not only survive but also thrive.

My parents immigrated to the United States from South Korea shortly before I was born in 1968. Growing up in the 1970s in small-town Pennsylvania, I straddled two cultures every day of my childhood. In some ways my parents were very Korean in how they raised us: We used chopsticks at the dinner table; kimchi, seaweed, and rice were staples in our home; I was taught not to call adults by their first names and to behave respectfully toward older relatives. Education was highly valued in our house and we were expected to complete our homework on time and get good grades. Sometimes this felt like a lot of pressure. At the same time, my parents had a broad perspective and were enthusiastic and relaxed about the things my brothers and I wanted to do, whether it was make our own Halloween costumes, pretend to pan for gold in a creek, watch movies for hours with our friends, or eat or read whatever we wanted. When I look back on my childhood, I am actually astounded by how little my parents questioned the things we were doing with our time and where our lives were going, especially since our American small-town childhood was so different from their own.

They had their worries, as many immigrant families who strongly want their children to thrive in their new society often do. I remember hushed conversations between my mom and dad about whether we were really getting a good education, and get-togethers with other Korean immigrant families where parents exchanged questions about the schools their children were attending as they tried to navigate an alien school system. Sometimes our differences really compounded my self-consciousness about being one of the few Asian-American students in school. But like many American parents of my generation, I find myself looking back with amazement at a degree of freedom and acceptance that seems virtually lost today. Even though my parents always conveyed the value of holding high expectations, they gave us so much time and space to experiment, play, and just *be*. They were always trying to do their best for us. They believed in our potential to flourish. But they weren't always trying to mold and change us.

During my twenties I lived in Japan several times, first to study Japanese and then to do research for a doctorate in East Asian history. In a remote village nestled in the mountainous countryside, I met David, who, like me, was a student who had come to Japan to learn the language. When David and I returned to the United States and decided to get married, we also knew that we might eventually be going back to Japan one day and maybe even raising children there. No matter where our children would grow up, though, I knew I loved America. And I knew there were many things from my own Korean-American upbringing and my Jewish-American husband's that would shape our family's life.

Now that we have four children, it seems incredible to me that I once wondered whether I would ever have the chance to be a mother. But having children has also humbled me, opened my eyes to how many decisions there are for parents to make, to how hard parenting can sometimes be, and to how uncertain I sometimes feel about whether I'm making the right choices and doing right by my kids.

I was sure about so many things before my children were born: They would eat no junk food, watch no violent TV. If my children were raised peacefully, they would never show interest in weapons or war. I would be attentive to them and watchful of their feelings. I would be an accepting, protective parent to give them a secure base.

When Benjamin was five and his little brother, Daniel, was three, we moved to Tokyo. I'd been a mother for five years already; I was certain that the way I parented (or at least tried to)—the way I'd learned in America—was the best way, and continued to feel like I was doing things right as our family expanded (our two daughters, Mia and Anna, were born in Japan). I'd been taught it was important to put our kids' needs first, to give them lots of choices, to praise them to make them feel confident. Like me, the American parents I knew made sure to keep their kids safe from risks, and spent "quality time" playing with them (or else

felt guilty about not playing with them). My American friends and I sought out the right classes, toys, and books to foster our young children's development, helped oversee their relationships and disagreements with other children, went to bat for them with their teachers and coaches, and guided what they did in their free time. We devoted ourselves to being the best parents we could be.

But as my own children attended local Japanese schools and we spent time with Japanese families, I saw children raised in a very different way who were clearly thriving, just as much—and sometimes more—than our own. Moms in Japan were surprised by how uptight I was about allowing sweets and were startled by how I monitored what my kids were allowed to watch on TV and the way I tried to stay on top of their behavior. My Japanese friends, unlike me, left their children on their own to figure out their relationships with other kids. They didn't closely watch over their behavior or worry they weren't giving their young kids the right opportunities. But despite how lax these Japanese moms seemed to me, I was constantly surprised by how mature and well-adjusted their children were, how capable, and how pleasant. These kids were being raised in ways that the American parents I knew might look at as simultaneously too permissive and too strict, yet they were clearly thriving.

It was during that time that I realized something that would change me completely: The parenting assumptions I'd held to be utterly and universally true were culturally based. Japanese parents had their own notions about good parenting, notions that were often startlingly different from my own. Sometimes even practically the opposite.

Even though I'd thought that the American way was the best, most progressive and enlightened way to raise all kids, it turned out this wasn't totally true. Our way was the best way from our point of view, because we were taught it was how to cultivate the things that happen to matter to many American parents (raising happy, high-achieving, creative, self-expressive, and unique kids) and the values we hold (egalitarianism, material success). Because of the history and the baggage that our generation has brought to parenting, much of child-rearing today is an understandable reaction to an era when children were to be seen, not heard, and their feelings and rights weren't considered equally important as those of adults.

Of course, all families are different, and it's really important to note that our considerable diversity means that class, region, and religious or ethnic background affect parenting styles too. There are many different childhoods in America. But I would argue that there is a distinctive American script about what constitutes "good parenting," especially for a typical middle-class or affluent family whose kids are college bound, and for the most part, that's the script I'll be talking about in this book.

This script isn't always visible to us unless we see it from the outside. That's what happened to me: The protectiveness, the degree and type of involvement and intensive cultivation that characterizes "good parenting" in our culture were pretty much invisible to me until I saw how startling my own behavior (which would have blended perfectly well in most American town and city playgrounds) appeared when we went to Japan. Parents wondered why I was following my children around the playground, why I talked to them so much about their feelings, gave them so many choices, tolerated so much negotiation, and why I was opposed to sending them to sleepaway camp in preschool.

When we returned to the United States, I was a different person and a different parent. I felt baffled by the dad I saw in a mall who told his toddler "good riding!" after a jaunt on the merry-go-round. To him, there was nothing distinctive about his behavior, and that's why he felt comfortable doing it. To me the excessive praise was jarring (though I understood where he was coming from and just a few years before wouldn't have given it a second thought). I was viewing him through a different cultural lens, one I acquired by parenting abroad.

I feel fortunate to be raising children in the United States. In the two years I've been researching this book and the ten years I've been thinking about these issues, I've come to appreciate the unique and positive aspects of American child-rearing today: our awareness of diversity,

the way we strive to teach our kids tolerance and a passion for social justice (which seems to be successful in a way I haven't seen elsewhere), and the way we cultivate a can-do and innovative attitude in our kids. We know how important it is to make our children feel respected and valued for the unique individuals they are, and we cherish the warm and close relationships with our kids that our culture encourages us to have. We value creativity, independence, and individualism: all good things in raising children who we fervently hope will become capable architects of their own meaningful and successful adult lives.

At the same time, many of us are more insecure than ever before, unsure if we are doing right by our children, and trying to figure out how to do better. There are many external indications that American children are suffering: We have one of the highest child obesity rates in the world, one in four American children is on medication, and American kids are three times more likely than some European children to take psychotropic drugs. Our kids score lower on standardized tests than many of their international peers, and even their empathy and creativity have been falling. We are increasingly alarmed as our children lag behind their peers in other countries in various measures of well-being, as they flounder and find it hard to gain their footing as adults in a difficult economic climate. Our joy in parenting is clouded by a drumbeat of worry. According to a recent major study of the American family, one of the main challenges facing American parents is their perception of how vulnerable their children are: a perception that makes today's parents markedly more anxious than previous generations. Despite the considerable and unprecedented amounts of parental investment we commit to our kids, we worry we are simply not doing enough. Often overscheduled and stressed out, children seem to lack initiative and self-reliance, even at relatively mature ages. Parents suffer too: Our beliefs about the right way to parent have been correlated with increased depression and stress. In this context it's easy to idealize other countries (Pamela Druckerman's book *Bringing Up Bébé*, which portrays French parenting as flawlessly relaxed, is a good case in point) or look back nostalgically at how good things "used to be."

French parents are not flawless. Japanese childhood isn't perfect, nor is childhood anywhere. Not only that, cultures are complex, dynamic, and ever evolving. But living abroad had many unexpected benefits for our kids that they couldn't have gotten back home. Once I realized this I started asking myself: Are there practices that other cultures and countries might be getting "right" about childhood too? What do parents in other cultures believe helps them to raise children who will thrive? Is there a sweet spot between culture (what society expects) and biology (what children evolved to thrive on) that other countries have hit upon in ways that we could learn from too? Could the child-rearing practices of other cultures help us nurture positive and important aspects of childhood in America—the things we do so well?

This book is about my search for answers to those questions. As we prepared to leave Japan in 2010 with our four kids to return to our American lives after five years abroad, I started to actively seek the stories of parents in other countries. I wanted to know more about the wisdom of parents in other cultures to meld with our own. While I looked at parenting norms all around the world, I mostly focused on countries where children's well-being (as measured by internationally agreed-upon indicators, such as UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child) is generally high, or where their child-rearing practices have some unique and important lessons to teach us.

Over the course of the year that followed, I traveled to Finland, China, South Korea, Germany, and Japan. I met with foreign parents from more than twelve different countries who were living in the United States, like Christa from Greece. She told me about her summers back home, where she could plunk her five-year-old twins down with family or friends with no advance notice or prescheduled playdates, where kids play freely by the sea or wield giant shears to prune grapes, where parents don't struggle to control everything, and a community raises kids in an enfolding, embracing way, ignoring (or even celebrating) their bumps and scrapes as part of an utterly ordinary, yet healthy, childhood.

I talked to and observed small children, school-age children, teens and college students and parents from around the world and interviewed

our country's most innovative and forward-thinking teachers and researchers—psychologists, educators, anthropologists, and sociologists—to find out about what was working and what wasn't in American parenting. I was surprised by how greatly parents around the world could differ in their expectations of their kids: what they should wear, how and what they ought to eat, or what kind of manners they should have—and how these small and seemingly unrelated notions actually reflected a coherent overall vision about child-rearing. Babies and toddlers who never left an adult's side day or night grew up to be astonishingly self-reliant children. Children seemed to feel more belonging, happiness, and security from seeing themselves as part of a community of people, rather than as individuals with individual needs that urgently had to be met. Some children who had everything they could possibly want experienced feelings of isolation and other disorders, despite the material abundance surrounding them.

I found there are reasons why many Scandinavians say their young ones should nap outdoors (because they believe fresh air, and being outdoors as much as possible, is good for them), why French parents teach their toddlers to sit at the table and eat politely (because they want to cultivate an appreciation for food as early as possible), and why American pediatricians tell their patients that the best place for a baby to sleep is in a crib (because they believe it's not only safest, but crucial for a child's independence) and recommend that parents read aloud to their young children (to hone cognitive and verbal skills).

Some of the most interesting and revealing moments happened when I asked parents about things that were so far outside their experience or cultural norms that they couldn't at first understand the question. One German mother lamented the fact that her children barely got any time to play out of doors. It turned out that her children actually spent two hours playing outdoors daily, about seventeen times more than their American peers, but from her German perspective, it wasn't nearly enough. Once I asked a Turkish mother how long they might let babies cry in her country and she looked at me with confusion—because in her worldview, a baby should always be held and comforted. It took me time

to recognize that when Japanese parents remarked on how friendly I was with my children, it wasn't always a compliment; to them it seemed to blur the line between being a friend (which isn't what the role of a good parent is in Japan) and a guide who had her child's best interests at heart.

Each encounter was like discovering another piece of a puzzle whose final shape I could not yet picture. But, as time went by, I found myself at last drawing closer to recognizing what it was that other countries had that we in the United States did not.

The more parents, teachers, and researchers I spoke with—all people who were intimately familiar with the mandate of raising children—the easier it became to connect the dots. Unlike in the United States, parents overseas were confident and certain where we Americans were beset by too many options, which tended to make us feel confused about our role. As I learned more about the history behind many of our contemporary parenting practices, I wondered if perhaps we Americans were paying a price for what we thought were enlightened and modern parenting ways, ways that give us choices, along with the mistaken (but oppressive) belief that as long as we choose wisely, we will be able to completely and perfectly control how our children's lives turn out.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines are discovering that the keys to raising resilient, compassionate, competent children can be found in the simplest practices. Often it means doing less, like giving kids time to play away from adult eyes, even if that means they will have disagreements with their friends that an adult won't help them solve. Sometimes it means doing more, like requiring them to do regular chores so they feel competent and needed.

Protecting our kids from discomfort isn't the same as doing what's best for them. Many parents in other countries strongly believe that cultivating children's character should be as much a parenting goal as cultivating their academic achievement. In countries such as Japan, Sweden, and France, parents told me that teaching children to care for one another, to be compassionate and present members of the family, and to think also about the needs in their communities were the most important jobs in raising them. In America, and in my own family, I realized,

while we also care about these things, we too often encourage our children's self-expression, uniqueness, and individual achievement to the detriment of the community and to the detriment of their happiness.

For many of us, parenting has become an individualized experience, especially since we—not society, not other parents, friends, family, or teachers, but parents alone—feel so responsible for our children's entire lives. The kind of parent we are (or the way our child turns out) defines the kind of person we are. No wonder American parents are having such an identity crisis and feel inadequate and judged so much of the time.

I have come to understand that many parenting practices can be traced not just to culture, but also to where a culture lies on the continuum between promoting individualism and promoting community cohesiveness. The most successful parenting practices are consistent, reinforced by others, and have conviction behind them. Parenting is so much easier if raising children is not up to an individual parent or family, but is considered a community mandate that everyone shares.

There's no more revealing (if humbling) way to see what we're doing and why we are doing it than to look at ourselves through the eyes of another culture. This book examines parenting practices in America and throughout the world to look at why we parent the way we do, what parents in other countries do, and what our collective wisdom can teach all of us about raising capable and confident children who thrive.

PART 1

The Care and Feeding of Children

ONE

SLEEP TIME:
Keep Our Babies Close or Give Them Space?

When Lisa, a mom from suburban Pennsylvania, first got pregnant, she did everything right. She took prenatal swimming, HypnoBirthing and Bradley classes, drank all the right herbal teas (red raspberry leaf, no sugar), and even became certified as a prenatal yoga instructor. Admittedly nervous about becoming a mother for the first time, she felt well prepared and confident.

But once Isabel arrived, Lisa felt blindsided by motherhood. Forget the cuddly image of a little baby curled up peacefully in a crib as her parents gaze lovingly from the doorway. Baby Isabel slept fitfully, as though she were on high alert. She napped for only twenty minutes at a time. When Lisa put Isabel in a bassinet by the bed, she would jolt awake every time the baby sighed. When she had her in a crib down the hall with a baby monitor, she anxiously tuned in to every sound.

When the baby was two months old, she began to wake less at night. Lisa was cautiously elated. "I couldn't wait to get a full night's sleep. I assumed it would be right around the corner!" she told me. But then Isabel started day care and went through a spate of illnesses. Once she

started getting sick, she stopped sleeping. "I tried everything. Nothing worked," Lisa remembered. "She kept waking every two hours. Sometimes during the day I would nap with her. Those were the only times she would sleep really long and deep, but it terrified me." The research Lisa had done cautioned strongly against co-sleeping because of the risk of suffocation. Isabel's crib had no bumpers, because Lisa had read those were unsafe. She was careful not to use a blanket and to always put her baby to sleep on her back.

Lisa was exhausted. Sleep is linked with cognitive development. It consolidates memory in children and adults alike, and helps us learn. Sleep disturbances have been associated with everything from attention deficits to negative mood to obesity. A freelance writer working from home, Lisa was making careless mistakes like dialing into a conference call on the wrong day. Clients were visibly disappointed. She stopped going to her book club, which was one thing she'd loved in her pre-baby days, and fell out of touch with her friends. People called to see how she was doing, but she would be too tired to talk to them. She became snippy with her mother and mother-in-law whenever they gently suggested a different parenting strategy. Her marriage began to founder too—she and her husband stopped having sex and communicated only when they fought. The lack of sleep was casting a shadow over her entire life.

Lisa's friends, her pediatrician, and her lactation nurse urged her to let the baby cry it out—to put her in her crib and let her cry herself to sleep. The idea was that self-soothing would become Isabel's new normal, and soon she wouldn't need a human being's presence to fall or stay asleep. *She would be able to do it on her own.* And Lisa would be a good—and much saner—parent for teaching her baby to be more independent. So finally, when Isabel was eight months old and Lisa was at the end of her rope, she gave it a try. Lisa put baby Isabel in her crib at bedtime and left the room.

It was really hard to hear her cry. "The first night I sat outside her door and listened to her scream, shake the rails on her crib, and choke on her own mucus for almost two hours," Lisa remembered. "It was horrible. I sat outside her door the whole time with my heart pounding, my

eyes glassy, and questioning myself, 'How could this possibly be the right thing to do?'"

But it worked. Within three nights Isabel was waking only once. She still has a lot of separation anxiety, though. Eight years old and in third grade, Isabel still asks to sleep in Lisa's bed and still wants her mom to sit next to her in the backseat of the car.

THE AMERICAN WAY OF SLEEP

Could there have been another way for Lisa to get enough rest in those difficult early days of transitioning into motherhood? Could there be a gentler way for her baby to have learned to sleep?

Most American parents believe it's normal for babies to sleep alone. They consider a full night of solid, uninterrupted sleep to be ideal, even for a baby who is just a few weeks old. Our cultural belief about infant sleep is that it should be solitary, scheduled, independent, and fuss-free.

We're told solitary sleep is a skill and that we should teach our children how to do it. Sleep is highly valued in America and though studies show we exaggerate how little sleep we get, Americans are often convinced they are not getting enough. That's why there are thousands of articles on the Internet and in parenting magazines about babies and sleep, and dozens of books on the topic. Experts love to offer exhausted American parents salvation in the form of sleep-training methods, which change a baby's sleep associations. They urge mothers to avoid nursing or rocking their babies to sleep, keep to a regular nap and bedtime schedule, and aim to gradually extinguish unhealthy sleep habits through crying it out and encouraging babies to self-soothe so they'll sleep through the night.

In America we believe solitary sleep is necessary to raising an autonomous and independent child. We think we're being good parents when we set up a baby nursery, buy a crib and baby monitors, and teach our baby to sleep separately from us. If we don't teach our babies to sleep on their own, the thinking goes, they will never leave our beds.

. . .

Ask parents in other parts of the world where a baby should sleep, and you may just get a baffled look. In most cultures around the world, human babies do not sleep alone. Most of the world assumes babies weren't meant to sleep by themselves, so babies usually sleep with their mothers and children sleep with siblings or other family members. In a study of 136 societies, infants slept in bed with their mothers in two-thirds of the communities; in the other third, most babies slept with another combination of family members. Out of one hundred countries in another survey, only American parents had a separate sleeping space for their children.

What we consider normal shapes our expectations—and sets us up for disappointment when reality (in the form of an otherwise adorable twelve-pound "light sleeper") fails to match up. If Lisa had not expected her baby to sleep alone without waking, would she have been so upset? Her feelings of anxiety and guilt might have been less painful if she had understood that babies are not sound sleepers and don't have to be, that all around the world, they wake up at night, needing to be nursed or reassured. And then they go back to sleep (usually snuggled next to a parent).

Lisa instinctively noticed that Isabel slept best in her arms. What Lisa didn't know is that Isabel slept best that way because that's how human babies evolved to sleep. Research suggests that co-sleeping is more in sync with an infant's primal attachment needs, and that separation of the newborn and his mother can lead to the very sleep problems American parents fear. "Resisting the intense desire of young children for close proximity with caregivers at night may set the stage for bedtime protest and persistent night waking in the United States," says one study comparing children's sleep in Japan and the United States. Peter Gray, a professor of psychology at Boston College, argues solitary sleep is an "evolutionary mismatch," noting that parents in hunter-gatherer societies "know very well why young children protest against being left alone in the dark." Gray points out that for most of human history (and even today in some places) any child who was left alone at night was in danger of being eaten by predators. A human baby is hardwired to feel that lying alone in the dark without any adults nearby puts him in the ultimate danger. Furthermore, young infants do not understand object permanence—the concept that though something disappears from view it still exists. So how will he understand that come morning, his parents will be there for him again?

Co-sleeping Is Safe

But many parents believe that having babies sleep alone is better for babies and better for us. Not only is solitary sleep our cultural ideal, we are told that bed sharing is potentially lethal. A 2011 advertisement from Milwaukee's health department shows a white infant wearing only a diaper sleeping in an adult's bed surrounded by fluffy bedding, so close to a butcher knife that one finger actually rests on the handle. Doctors and public health officials warn us that we run the risk of rolling onto our infants and smothering them to death, they can get tangled in the bedsheets, and they have a higher likelihood of dying from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). "Babies can die when sleeping in adult beds," the ad reads.

American parents are right to be concerned about SIDS. In a survey of fifteen countries, the United States ranked second highest in the world in SIDS incidences. But SIDS is notably low in countries like Japan, where co-sleeping is the norm. Although the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) argues against it (it endorses room sharing but warns against bed sharing) and chances are your pediatrician will advise you to train your baby to sleep alone, other scientists, researchers, and pediatricians have found that co-sleeping, when practiced safely, is actually safer for infants than sleeping alone.

James McKenna, director of the Mother-Baby Behavioral Sleep Lab at the University of Notre Dame, has been researching mother-baby pairs for more than thirty years. McKenna first became intrigued by the

question of sleep when he and his wife, both trained anthropologists, became parents. They found themselves wondering why so much of the pediatric advice they were getting seemed at odds with all they had learned about human evolution and development. Observing mother-baby pairs in slumber, McKenna found that co-sleeping mothers' and babies' sleep cycles tended to be remarkably synchronized, which helped the mother get more restful sleep because she and the baby tended to enter lighter sleep at the same time. Tending to a baby who is right there next to her, when she's in a light stage of sleep anyway, isn't as disruptive to a mother's sleep as having to rouse herself out of a deep, groggy sleep, get out of bed, and walk to another room.

And while a co-sleeping infant wakes more frequently than an infant who sleeps alone, McKenna has found that these shorter cycles of sleep make it less likely an infant will have trouble rousing himself from deep sleep if his body is still too immature to deal with physiological crises (think of light sleep as nature's way of protecting a very young baby). Co-sleeping moms and babies tend to face each other during the night. Not only does her own breathing "cue" her baby to breathe, she is also right there to monitor her baby if he should run into trouble. In this way mother-child sleep may actually protect against sudden infant death syndrome. "Mothers and babies have been sleeping together for millions of years—we're here because of that," McKenna told me. "Anytime you have baby closer to the mother in a safe way, it reduces the chances of SIDS. That proximity provides a stream of interaction and a way to monitor baby. The presence of the mother is the primary inhibitor of SIDS."

When you look more closely at the studies that conclude co-sleeping is dangerous, you realize that the problem is the context in which these tragic incidents occurred. What the U.S. statistics and news stories don't show is that the overwhelming majority of accidental suffocations or overlays associated with co-sleeping occur in situations of urban poverty, where a number of risk factors tragically converge. Smoking, drug or alcohol use, co-sleeping on unsafe, non-bed surfaces (such as sofas or water-

beds), or falling asleep by accident with a baby in an unsafe environment all significantly increase the risk of SIDS. In one study, 99 percent of SIDS deaths had at least one of these risk factors. In an analytical report of infant deaths in Milwaukee that occurred between 2006 and 2008, on average, four risk factors were present. To blame an infant smothering by an intoxicated parent on co-sleeping is like blaming the act of driving for a drunk-driving accident: It's not that he was driving that caused the crash, it's that he was driving under the influence.

On the other hand, in a safe sleeping environment, proximity protects babies. When babies sleep in the same room with a parent, SIDS death rates are reduced by up to half. Cribs themselves aren't a guarantee of safety. (Most parents are surprised to learn that an average of twenty-six children are hurt by cribs, playpens, and bassinets each day in the United States.) But when babies die in cribs, no one takes this to mean we should stop using them.

Brief Nighttime Wakings Are Normal

Even after infants start sleeping through the night, parents are more likely than not to find themselves revisiting sleep issues during childhood. Once babies become toddlers, they may start waking up at night. This toddler night-waking happens to most kids, peaking between one and a half and two years, when they get their two-year molars. There are other reasons for disrupted sleep at this age besides teething pain. They've come far in that first year, and they're now aware of how separate they are from their parents. Life isn't just an amorphous blur of sound and sensation. If they're sleeping separately, they wake up instinctively wanting to go in search of a parent.

Interestingly, studies show that co-sleeping children experience more frequent but shorter night-wakings than children who sleep alone. A child wakes up, quietly opens his eyes, but soon drifts right back to

sleep, reassured by the presence of adults or siblings nearby. These wakings usually aren't disruptive. But if a child who sleeps alone wakes up repeatedly, sometimes frightened and crying, then gets out of bed to search for his parents and needs help calming down before returning to sleep, both the child and his parents get a lot less sleep.

Allison, a mom of four living in Wisconsin, tried a variety of sleep methods with each of her children. She made a halfhearted attempt to sleep train her first child ("My husband wondered why I was doing it as I sat in the living room crying"), put her second and third children to sleep in their own beds, but co-slept with her fourth child, Delena, through toddlerhood. She said, "I recall awakening as Delena's arm reached out for me. She would briefly touch me and then settle back to sleep. I don't know if she even fully woke up. I thought it was so sweet that she was so aware of my presence that it reassured her so quickly."

THE HISTORY OF SOLITARY SLEEP

Americans didn't always sleep separately from their babies. The Western idea that mothers and babies should sleep separately originated in ecclesiastical laws to protect babies against "overlaying" (in some cases a covert method of infanticide) in the Middle Ages. Still, most Western babies continued to sleep together with an adult as they always had (cold houses made it unthinkable to put a newborn to sleep by herself), and our modern practice of solitary infant sleep would have seemed very odd to most parents. Communal sleep was so normal that it wasn't unusual for men to share a bed when lodging at an inn while traveling.

As living conditions changed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, though, and more families had the space to provide separate sleeping spaces for their children, having a separate nursery for children became desirable, a tangible sign of "progress" and modernity that Western families aspired to.

These kinds of shifts are nothing new. Parents have ricocheted from

one philosophy to another over the years as they try to make sense of the wordless little beings in their care. Mid-nineteenth-century English parents were exhorted to bathe their babies in cold water to strengthen their bodies and souls. This was in the days before modern plumbing; hot water for a bath was painstakingly difficult to come by. It became almost necessary to tout the moral good of cold water for little bodies and developing characters. As historian Christina Hardyment tells us in her book *Dream Babies: Childcare Advice from John Locke to Gina Ford*, when piped hot water developed several decades later, popular opinion changed.

Until the late nineteenth century, there wasn't a lot of attention paid to children's sleep. What advice there was focused on things like the sleep environment—how warm or cool the sleeping area should be, or what kind of mattress to use—rather than on sleep itself. People assumed that babies and children knew how to sleep, that they could regulate themselves, and, most surprisingly, that they didn't need a whole lot of nighttime sleep. But anxiety about children's well-being was gradually rising, and sleep became a part of this anxiety too. Professional advice and rules about infant and child sleep—how babies should sleep, how many hours they ought to sleep—increased as it became less common for families to have paid help, extended family under the same roof, or many siblings to share a bed. Experts began to warn mothers against rocking their babies to sleep, for fear of creating bad habits. Cradles were out; cribs, which couldn't be moved easily from room to room and didn't require an adult's presence, were in.

Once a mother, and no one else, was fully responsible for nighttime care, it became more important for a baby to be able to sleep long hours. The accompanying surge of expert advice on sleep gave parents a new concern to focus upon: how to get children to sleep for those long hours alone. But the new view of sleep as needing to be structured and regimented, ironically, may have contributed most to our poor and problematic sleep habits. Historian Peter Stearns and his colleagues write, "The goal was, of course, to train children so well for sleep that they would carry secure patterns through the rest of their lives. But surrounding

sleep with rules and anxiety could be counterproductive." Once sleep became something to achieve, rather than something that just happened, adulthood sleep problems also started to become the norm.

THE JAPANESE WAY OF SLEEP

In Japan, friends always asked me the same question: Is it *really* true that American parents put their babies to sleep in a separate room?

Masako, a mother of four living near Nagoya, couldn't imagine separate sleep. She laughed about the contortions her children get into spreading their futons out on the floor each night so that each child could have a little bit of contact with her at nighttime. With all those kids, she told me, this inevitably meant that one child ended up sleeping right up near her head. Masako, a homemaker, and her husband, who is a dentist, are affluent by Japanese standards, but space is at a premium in Japan and their family of six lives in a traditionally small home. (Still, there is room for Masako and her husband to sleep separately from their kids if they want to.) Masako told me almost every Japanese baby sleeps in the same room as his mother. She was surprised when I told her about the typical American way of solitary sleep. It was a hard concept for a Japanese mother to fathom. What if the baby needed comforting in the night? Wasn't everyone lonely?

After talking to Masako, I began to notice that the sleep of Japanese babies looked different. I saw babies and toddlers sleeping everywhere: in their mothers' arms, in slings, in strollers, on futons on the floor, in parent meetings at school, or at the grocery store. Little Hitoha-chan, a toddler with curly black hair, snugly rode on her mother's back for four hours one morning while a bunch of parents cooked lunch together at my daughter's preschool. Her mother didn't interrupt helping out at school to rush Hitoha-chan home for a nap.

Some families had cribs, kept in the middle of the living room or near the heart of family activity. No one I knew had a separate nursery in Japan, even in homes where there was space for one. Cribs were used

for naps, not nighttime sleep. *There was just no concept that a baby needed her own space. To the contrary, Japanese mothers didn't want little babies to feel too alone.* Being a good parent meant anticipating a child's needs before the child even asked, with the idea that responding quickly to a baby would help her become a harmonious child. So what I saw was a flexible, relaxed attitude. Babies were brought along everywhere, sleeping whenever they felt sleepy, wherever they happened to be. Japanese parents didn't talk about putting their babies on a sleep schedule. Nor, in fact, did I hear parents talk about their own sleep deprivation. It was as though the concept didn't exist. (Insomnia and sleeplessness—common problems in our culture—aren't such identifiable disorders in Japan.)

At pediatrician visits or during casual conversations with other parents, everyone in Japan simply assumed that my baby was sleeping next to me at night. Children's books featured co-sleeping animals or children. I opened a baby goods catalog to see an advertisement for giant family-size futons, featuring two beaming children cozily tucked in between their parents. Our local elementary school showed parents of incoming students a movie with a scene of a mother lying down next to her grade-schooler as he drifted off to sleep. And of course, most of our kids' friends were also sharing sleep in their families. Sharing sleep seemed so normal to our kids that they actually were surprised to see babies sleeping alone in their own rooms when we visited the United States. They thought baby monitors were used to help babies hear their families, not the other way around.

A PUSH TOWARD EARLY INDEPENDENCE

Why would it matter so much where and how a baby sleeps, anyway? Sleep, as important as it is, isn't just about sleep. Parents in cultures around the world believe that what happens during nighttime hours shapes children's behavior during waking hours, their confidence levels, and their sense of self.

In America, many of our parenting strategies even from infancy are geared toward the goal of raising children who will be able to develop a solid sense of themselves as separate, distinct individuals. Not only do babies sleep in private, quiet sleeping environments, we also embrace other practices that aim to foster a sense of independence from others. We seat a baby in her own car seat, push her in her own stroller, talk to her as an equal, face-to-face. We respond animatedly to her smiling or babbling—which psychologists call "positive cues"—to encourage the qualities we prize: interactive communication, self-expression, and self-awareness.

These are what we consider good parenting practices. Our job is to help our kids become independent. When a baby seems too attached to us, we worry about her future, wondering if she will ever feel comfortable out of our sight. If an American baby is crying at night, her mother of course knows the baby is distressed, but her reaction to this is shaped by the idea that good parents help their babies get used to separation, because this will give them confidence.

Parents in a lot of non-Western cultures, on the other hand, would be alarmed by this much focus on things such as stimulating a baby, keeping him separate, and not responding quickly to his cries. They believe that close physical touch and shared sleep are healthy because they enfold a child into an interwoven network of clearly defined social relationships. The idea is this: If you hone a baby's sense of affiliation to those around him, and respect his innate sense that he is one with others, he will feel security as he grows up and eventually become an independent contributing member of his community who can take responsibility for himself.

While we tend to think of solitary sleep as the first step to creating an independent, autonomous child, parents in non-Western cultures like Japan believe that by sleeping next to other people children feel more connected. They see that babies who have their nighttime needs met in turn grow into children who are able to intuit and respond sensitively to the needs of other people. The Japanese don't see the early attachment

between a baby and mother as unhealthy dependence, but instead as one of the first steps to fostering important skills children need to thrive and succeed later on.

Parents in these interdependent cultures don't focus as much direct attention on babies or rearrange their houses to accommodate them. Instead, babies nap amidst the bustle and noise of ordinary daily living. If a baby is waking at night, Japanese parents believe responding, rather than becoming anxious that the baby isn't meeting a developmental goal such as sleeping through the night by twelve weeks, is the best way to raise a good sleeper. They can't put their whole lives on hold for a baby by adjusting their schedule so he can stay home for his nap. If a baby is waking at night, it's a sign of some underlying need to respond to.

EARLY SHARED SLEEP FOSTERS LATER INDEPENDENCE

Meret Keller and Wendy Goldberg, psychology professors at the University of California at Irvine, found that it's true that solitary sleepers achieve some goals of independence earlier: They learned to fall asleep alone, sleep through the night, and wean slightly earlier than co-sleepers. But, their more surprising finding was that early co-sleepers—children whose parents had intentionally chosen to co-sleep with them from infancy—later became *more* independent and self-reliant. In one of their studies, mothers of preschoolers reported that co-sleepers were more socially independent—dressing themselves, working out problems with playmates by themselves—than either solitary sleepers or children whose parents had co-slept with them after age one.

Keller and Goldberg's research squarely contradicts the Western idea that sleeping *alone* will foster more independent children. In fact, if we broaden how we define independence, the opposite seems to be true. "Many people throw the word 'independence' around without thinking conceptually about what it actually means," Keller explained to me. "Do

they mean ability to fall asleep alone, and ability to sleep through the night alone, without parent assistance? If so, then yes, co-sleepers are often less independent—within this specific sleep domain. What most people do not think about is the possibility of independence for many, many daytime behaviors, and in other domains such as cognitive, social, emotional, or daily living skills." Keller noted that independence can also include self-care, basic chores such as setting the table, relationships with peers, dressing oneself, and entertaining oneself alone with a book or toy. She and Goldberg are exploring in their research how attachment security formed between parents and children who sleep together at night might serve as a sort of springboard for independent behavior during the day.

My son's friend Tomo, a ten-year-old boy living in the neighborhood adjoining ours in Tokyo, was certainly independent. He started walking to school without an adult at age six. He rode his bike to the park alone to meet friends. He carried everything he might need—a little money, a handkerchief, his refillable water flask—in a little bag slung over one shoulder. When Tomo came to our house to play, he lined his shoes up by the door and hung up his jacket just so. Tomo never asked me or another adult to help him. Instead, when it was time to cook dinner he helped me without being asked. Tomo was so competent that I sometimes depended on him to prepare the salad or stir-fry some noodles while I took care of other things. Yet every night when Tomo went home at the end of the day, he took his bath and then fell asleep next to his aunt, who was helping to raise him. Tomo had slept next to his aunt nearly all his life. A mature, reliable, independent kid during the day, Tomo shared sleep with an adult at night.

Japan is full of kids like Tomo. After years of living there on and off, my husband and I (and even our kids) have noticed that most children—the same children who sleep with their parents every night—take care of themselves and their belongings, work out peer conflicts, and show mature social behavior and self-regulation at a young age. Japanese parents expect their kids to be independent by taking care of themselves

and being socially responsible. They expect them to help contribute to the household or school community by being capable and self-reliant. And they don't worry that this is too much to expect of them, given the context of the twenty-four-hour give-and-take relationship they have with one another.

THE SWEDISH WAY OF SLEEP

In Sweden, similarly, co-sleeping is regarded positively. It's considered so ordinary that it's not thought of consciously at all. The Swedes believe that letting a child share sleep with a parent, if he wants to, is good for him.

In a study of Swedish attitudes toward co-sleeping, researcher Barbara Welles-Nystrom found that nearly three-quarters of children co-slept with their parents at some point during the night. While nearly all children in the study had their own beds, flexibility marked nighttime sleep: many of them wandered into their parents' bed during the night and stayed there until they fell asleep (after that parents might take them back to their own bed, move to the child's bed themselves, or let them stay the night). Why do the Swedish tolerate—and embrace—practices that so many Americans would consider to cause a disrupted night of sleep? According to Welles-Nystrom, Swedish parental theories about co-sleeping say that "the child is a 'natural being' who needs a safe environment in which to develop. If parents take their cues from the child . . . and satisfy the child's needs, the child will develop normally and at its own speed." Swedish parents believe that co-sleeping is a normal phase that children will outgrow. They are fond of asking rhetorically, "Who has ever seen an adult sleeping together in the same bed as their parents?" Finally, Swedish parents believe children have a right to co-sleep if they want to. "The child is considered an individual with certain rights, which in this case include the right of access to the safety and comfort of the parents' body at any time of day or night," writes Welles-Nystrom in

her article. She quotes parents: "We see so little of the children during the day that we all want to fill up our tanks with love at night sleeping together," said one mother in her study.

Swedish parents believe that if a child wants and desires the security of co-sleeping, this will only help him to be more secure and independent as he grows. Rather than worry about its impact on a child's developing autonomy, *they believe it actually helps to promote independence.* Swedish health care professionals share this belief as well, which normalizes the practice.

Intrigued, I asked Swedish families about their attitudes about sharing a bed. As I spoke to Ulrika, a mother of two, who Skyped with me from her home in Stockholm, I realized that some of my questions about sleeping with children were hard for her to understand, because co-sleeping is so unremarkable there that it was like I was asking if ice is cold or birds fly.

I asked if there is any stigma about co-sleeping with babies or children in Sweden. Ulrika told me, "My son hardly slept in his own bed until he was three years old. And I think this is true of most people. It's so normal here—from time to time your child wants to sleep in your bed, and you let them because they need to cuddle, talk to you, and feel comfortable."

You would be hard-pressed to find a parent in Sweden who has never slept with a child in bed, Ulrika explained. "It's normal, not judged or anything," she said. "What would be judged would be never letting your child sleep with you if he needs to."

I asked her whether Swedes sleep with their babies. Ulrika told me *of course they do.* At the hospital after the children were born, she got sleeping instructions that assumed the baby would be in her bed. "We learned that we shouldn't put really small babies under a blanket, so we would put them on top of the blanket, with a small blanket over them," Ulrika explained. "In Sweden breast-feeding is very important and if you have the baby in bed with you, you don't have to get up. It's much less tiring to the mother." When I asked if her babies were able to sleep

through the night, Ulrika looked momentarily confused. In Sweden, apparently, there isn't a widespread belief that young babies should sleep through the night. If they are in bed, and breast-feeding, they won't be sleeping through the night, and that's okay. So Ulrika hadn't ever really thought about this idea before.

I then asked a final question: Do Swedes think that sleeping with their children will somehow prevent them from becoming independent? Here, Ulrika sat up a little straighter and spoke forcefully. "My kids have taken the subway since age nine to go to school and walked on their own since they were six or seven," she said. "Generally, the Swedish way of raising children is to make them independent, help them to learn to use their own judgment and not just listen to authority. It's about giving them security: the more certain they feel you are there for them and can rely on you, the more independent they become."

At this juncture, her thirteen-year-old son, Alex, wandered into the room. Brown-haired and friendly, Alex was very curious about the idea of someone interviewing his mother about co-sleeping, something that he and all his friends had done. I wondered if anyone ever made any negative comments to a boy who slept with his parents. He shook his head no—the idea had never occurred to him. How long did he co-sleep with them? He looked at his mother questioningly. "I slept in your bed until I was six, or seven, or eight." He looked at her again and they both thought about this a bit. Maybe ten or eleven, they concurred, if he had a bad dream.

I asked if Alex remembered what it was like. "I thought it was," he hesitated and searched for the right word in English . . . "security. It gave me security. It was kind of normal to be in your bed when I had a nightmare or something," he said, smiling shyly at his mother. As our conversation drew to a close, Ulrika added, "Rather than sitting up for half the night . . . you can just all relax together." She shrugged and smiled at the practicality of it all. "It makes it so much easier."

BELIEFS ABOUT SLEEP BASED ON CULTURE, NOT SCIENCE

In America we are told that babies need a certain number of hours of sleep; a nightly bath, several books, and a lovey are part of the bedtime routine; daytime naps must continue until a certain age; babies sleep best in quiet, dark rooms by themselves.

Many cultures have idiosyncratic ideas about what sleep should look like, as Anastasya, an American mom married to a Danish man, discovered when she visited her husband's native Copenhagen with their infant son. In Scandinavia, it's customary for babies to take their naps outdoors despite the cold winters. (The Finnish government assures new mothers, "Many babies sleep better outdoors in the fresh air than in the bedroom. Sleeping outdoors is not dangerous for a baby.") Babies are bundled up and left in prams on terraces or outside of stores to sleep. In Denmark they're *really* bundled up: Danish babies sleep under a mountain of blankets, under down comforters called "dunes." This was a total surprise to Anastasya, as it would be to any American mom who's learned that babies must never sleep under a heavy blanket or have anything in their cribs or sleeping spaces at all—let alone sleep unattended, out of doors. When she first saw babies in these blanketed prams, she had to check the impulse to pull the blankets off. But being in Denmark gave her a chance to see her own cultural assumptions through fresh eyes. After that, her little boy, Oliver, began sleeping under a dune himself, with toys in his crib.

Most of our rituals, convictions, and rules about sleep are based in cultural beliefs, not scientific evidence. Numerous sleep researchers agree, for instance, that there's actually no evidence for how many hours a baby is supposed to sleep. When I asked Jodi Mindell, a clinical psychologist, professor at Saint Joseph's University, and one of the country's foremost sleep researchers, who has also written a popular sleep-training book, how many hours a baby should be sleeping, she replied, "Ahh, the

question of the decade! Or maybe century. We really do not know what is the sleep 'need' for infants. We only know what children are getting at this point."

Most American infants and toddlers get a little less than thirteen hours of sleep a day. No matter how much sleep your child gets, it's easy to worry that he isn't getting enough. Curiously, over the decades the recommended amount of sleep has always been consistent at any given time: it's always been about thirty-seven minutes more than the actual amount of sleep children are getting. The number of hours that children sleep has declined over the years, but we have no evidence for how much sleep they really need. As adults, we valorize the eight-hour-a-night sleep. But in reality, sleep patterns vary—for adults and kids alike—throughout the world, and have throughout our history, encompassing anything from short little naps and nighttime fragments, to long siestas and late bedtimes. (And that solid eight-hour sleep is a modern construct that may not be what we were wired for.) These differences show us how fluid these so-called norms are. What we think is immutable, universal, or optimal about sleep actually looks different all around the world.

Bedtime habits are one of the most important ways we ritualize sleep. Bedtime routines are more complex when children are expected to sleep by themselves; it takes work to teach babies to sleep on their own. These complex bedtime routines serve a purpose: they mark the shift between communal daytime activities and the abrupt transition to sleeping alone. Ideally, the bedtime routine serves the purpose it's meant to: it is a reassuring signal to the child about what lies ahead. For some parents, though, the process might take lots of time and energy, especially if a child needs to go through many comforting steps before being able to fall asleep on his own, or is struggling with bedtime fears.

In some cultures there is no bedtime routine at all. Guatemalan Mayan babies, who share a room or co-sleep with parents and siblings and spend all day in close proximity with others, simply fall asleep when they are sleepy, and do not change into special sleep clothes, brush their teeth, or typically use any transitional objects. They just sleep. In communities where sleeping with others is normal and routine, there might

not even be a bedtime. Children learn to sleep "at will," and can nod off flexibly under all sorts of circumstances to the murmur of activities and sounds in the background.

Transitional attachment objects also aren't common in cultures where children spend more time in physical touch with others—in co-sleeping cultures. The transitional object is a substitute for an adult caregiver, so many children don't find it necessary to have one if the adult caregiver is always there. We saw this in Japan, where we were struck by the sheer absence of any sort of attachment objects—we saw no children who clung to well-worn blankets or tattered stuffed animals. And we saw the reverse, coming back to the United States—how young children were highly attached to blankets and loveys, panicking when they got misplaced.

The obligatory before-bed book is not part of every culture's bedtime ritual. In Taiwan, picture books specifically about bedtime—featuring children mastering bedtime fears, saying good night one by one to objects, saying good night to a parent before falling asleep surrounded with stuffed animals or clutching a lovey—are almost always translations of Western imported books, because the idea that bedtime is a separate, distinct ritual just doesn't reflect the reality of bedtime for Taiwanese children. One popular American picture book even ends with a scene of the family dog sleeping with his (human) parents in their bed while the baby sleeps alone in another room—an unremarkable scene in many American homes, but truly startling to people from other cultures.

GOOD MATCH BETWEEN PARENT EXPECTATIONS AND CHILD'S SLEEP PERSONALITY = BEST REST

As Ella and Jack anticipated the arrival of their first child, they wondered about sleep. "I thought it was a little strange that people would go to sleep with their pets, but not their babies," Ella, a mom in Bellevue, Washington, admitted. Jack had been raised in a kibbutz in Israel where

he slept communally with other children; while they weren't with their parents, they weren't alone either. Both eventually decided against putting the new baby in a room by himself, and decided to bed share, placing on the floor mattresses that would eventually accommodate two adults, their children, and the family's beloved dogs.

When co-sleeping is a common, endorsed cultural practice, it's associated with little stress and few problems. But when parents sleep with their kids only as a last, reluctant resort for solving sleep problems—ranging from repeated requests for a drink of water or one more trip to the bathroom, to persistent, crippling bedtime fears and extended, disruptive night waking (problems possibly created by separate sleep in the first place) these embedded attitudes cause understandable feelings of ambivalence and stress.

Co-sleeping after the fact—in response to preexisting sleep problems—is called "reactive co-sleeping." Reactive co-sleeping can lead to power struggles between parent and child. Reactive co-sleeping by definition doesn't exist in cultures where co-sleeping is the norm and practiced from the beginning of a child's life, but it does here; it's another reason co-sleeping is viewed negatively: people often think of sharing sleep with a child as a last-resort strategy used for managing problems such as sleep protesting or night waking. We rarely hear what parents elsewhere know: intentional co-sleeping is one viable option to prevent such problems from arising in the first place.

For all the cultural differences around children's sleep, one thing is certain—the very best sleep happens when there is what researchers call "goodness of fit": the right match between a child's sleep personality and parental expectations. We have a better chance of achieving this "goodness of fit" with our own children if we can open our minds up to all the ways children might sleep well, and if we expand the definition of what "normal" sleep might be.

Ella and Jack got something right when they modified their sleeping environment to accommodate the needs of a co-sleeping family. This is exactly how parents in co-sleeping cultures devise sleeping arrangements that ensure restful sleep for parent and baby: they'll put futons on

the floor, prepare adjoining spaces for baby and mother that are separate from other family members, and give everyone room to spread out. Western co-sleeping is usually complicated by Western beds, which are high up off the floor and usually not wide enough for a family. This leads to the problems many associate with bed sharing: rolling on the baby, kicking, disrupted sleep, adult pillows and blankets dangerously close to the baby, baby falling off the side. How, really, could one be expected to get a good night's sleep?

Though she'd read that newborns slept constantly and through anything, Els and her partner, Lise, noticed that Sarah was different as soon as she was born. "When she was a week old, we took her out to meet friends, and I saw her eyes get bigger and bigger as she grew visibly more exhausted yet didn't want to go to sleep because what was going on was so interesting," Els told me. "This might have been my first inkling that baby books were not always right." Els made her peace with having a child who "never slept" by finally acknowledging that Sarah wasn't ever going to be one of those kids who slept long hours. Sarah simply wasn't wired to sleep like the baby our culture had conditioned her parents to expect.

Nina's parents, in Golden, Colorado, tried everything to get their baby to sleep better. Their pediatrician suggested patting her on the back. A sleep specialist they consulted told them to let her cry for "as long as it takes." The advice didn't work (they tried letting her cry once until Kurt went to get her, muttering, "This is ridiculous," as he picked his miserable baby up out of her crib). So Kurt and Cat moved their beds around to accommodate Nina's need for closeness. "She still needs a lot of touching and we lie down with her and her sister to put them to sleep," Cat told me. They now sleep well.

Lisa, Isabel's desperately sleep-deprived mother, doesn't regret having sleep trained her baby. "I was pretty crazy from sleep deprivation by that point. It was either that or, at some point, fall asleep while driving," she recalled to me. But she told me wistfully that she wondered if things would have been different if she had had more support. "We don't give new mothers any leeway to not be able to think straight. There are no studies on what happens with a mother who doesn't sleep for a year. I didn't have any support. I didn't have family in the area. I didn't have friends who knew how to help me. I think that's a typically American problem." She also wonders if some of her daughter's insecurities today stem from those early difficulties.

Even Dr. Richard Ferber, author of *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems* and founder and former director of Boston Children's Hospital Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders, whose name has become synonymous with the cry-it-out "Ferberizing" sleep-training method, now recognizes that there are many viable ways for a baby to sleep. Once a staunch proponent of babies' sleeping alone (even if a baby became so distressed he vomited), Ferber now states, "We've found that youngsters sleep very well in a variety of situations, as seen around the world. From a sleep perspective, we have little evidence for or against any of these arrangements."

Where should your baby sleep? Wherever he sleeps best. My Korean-born mother bought a crib for me because she thought that was the American way (though she confided in me recently that she rarely used it), and my parents did the "American" thing by providing my brothers and me each with our own room. Before having children, I thought I would do the same. Then we had our kids and found that we all slept best together. So David and I co-sleep with our kids, as growing numbers of American parents do.

TWO

BUY, BUY, BABY:

Why Are We Drowning in Stuff?

Kathy, an expectant mom in Seattle, wasn't sure what she and her husband would need for their new baby. She did ample research, reaching out to her circle of more experienced, savvier friends for their personal recommendations, and trawling online lists for must-have items. Soon she came up with a list of necessities.

Kathy planned on breast-feeding, so she needed silk/wool washable nursing pads, nontoxic breast cream, an electric breast pump, and glass bottles with nontoxic, BPA-free nipples of various sizes (she'd be getting a nursing pillow once she sourced an appropriately flame-retardant-free one). She already knew which brand and style of brush she wanted to clean the bottles, though she hadn't yet decided which insulated bottle holder to buy. She had determined exactly what size and brand of diaper pail and washable diaper pail liner she'd use for their cloth diapers, though she and her husband were still not sure whether they'd be using a diaper delivery service or buying their own (it was such a hard decision for new parents, with more than fifteen brands to choose from, each more stylish than the next). But at least Kathy did know how much

clothing they'd need to start off: ten organic cotton bodysuits or kimono shirts, ten pajamas with attached feet, four sleeping sacks, a fashionable, gauzy swaddling blanket, ten burp cloths, and ten bibs.

Kathy and her husband wanted a certain baby bath, which was twice the price of the kinds of baby baths for sale in Target, but it was worth the extra cost because of its unique and comfortable design. They planned to wash their baby in nontoxic bath wash and dry the baby off with a specialty organic-cotton hooded baby towel. A teething doll made of soft organic cotton would ease teething pain; it was safe to chew on and cuddly to boot. The baby would also have several nontoxic specialty pacifiers to choose from. A gentle animal mobile made of little hand-crocheted figures imported from India would hang above the Ikea crib and organic mattress and bedding to lull baby off to sleep, and a beech-wood rattle hand-carved in Germany would entertain baby during waking hours. Kathy had already decided on a nontoxic, phthalate-free bamboo-filled play mat, which had a colorful design that would promote brain development and encourage baby to crawl, and she had also chosen which French-language Baby Einstein DVDs their baby—who would be raised bilingually—would enjoy.

A few outstanding items remained to be added to the list: Would the baby need a bassinet or would the crib be sufficient? Would Kathy need a nursing stool? Should they get a diaper rash ointment made of extra-virgin coconut oil and calendula? What kind of mirror for the backseat would be best to help baby tolerate car rides? And though they'd already decided on which front pack and sling they would carry their baby in, they still needed to research a baby stroller and a car seat.

Kathy and her husband were an eco-friendly couple. As conscientious consumers, they knew about making careful choices for themselves, so it was natural for them to turn their formidable information-gathering skills to look for the best products for their baby. Kathy's choices reflected how carefully she considered things, and what thoughtful parents she and her husband wanted to be.

According to one study, the average American family gains 30 percent more possessions with the arrival of each child. For modern

American parents, providing a baby with food, clothing, shelter, and love is no longer enough. Today, good parenting has become defined by what you pick for your baby, whether you're buying premium organic wooden toys from a hip boutique store or stimulating, bright plastic learning toys from Walmart. We need to buy a lot of stuff for our baby in order to raise a happy, healthy, thriving child. Right?

TOO MUCH STUFF

American parents face this paradox: our culture and media tell us that our children deserve the best, but those of us who strive to give our children that "best" often give them too much. It begins early. At our very first visit to the obstetrician's office, the waiting-room coffee table is stacked with magazines and pamphlets full of appealing advertisements for baby gear, educational toys, and adorable clothes. Even before our baby is born, we parents are well on our way to accumulating stuff: car seats, clothes, diapers, toys, mobiles, strollers, cribs, carriers, high chairs, and even flash cards. As our children get older, the gear they seem to need increases: Legos, dolls, art and craft supplies, bikes (and helmets) or scooters or skateboards, sporting equipment, books and clothes, electronic games, iPods, enrichment workbooks, trendy clothing, maybe even a cell phone. There might be a Wii in the living room, a trampoline in the backyard, stilts and Rollerblades on the porch. They accumulate all this before they've even graduated from elementary school. Then there are the vacation souvenirs, presents we bring home when we go out of town, and impulse buys from those spontaneous shopping trips. It's not only what we buy them ourselves: our kids also accumulate birthday presents from friends and family, holiday gifts from well-meaning grandparents, and special things from family friends.

We may not realize how much savvy marketers work to ensure that products for children entice us. We buy stuff because of the promise the purchase holds to enhance our children's lives. Persuasive, anxiety-inducing advertising convinces us that the very brands we buy will determine whether our babies will be smiley or colicky, whether our toddlers will be happy or throw tantrums, and whether our school-age children fail or succeed. The advertising coaxes us into believing that what we own defines the kind of parents we are (and the kind of kids we're raising), whether that's urban and hip, healthy and athletic, nature-loving and organic, worldly and adventurous, artsy and eclectic, or sports-loving and down-to-earth.

It's no surprise that the inside of so many American family homes looks like a retailer's warehouse, or enough goods, as one friend remarked wryly, to pay for a second mortgage for her home. According to one study, three-quarters of American families surveyed had stopped using their garages to park their cars, using them instead to house their excess stuff.

WHY WE BUY

Children didn't used to be on the receiving end of as much spending as they are today. In early-nineteenth-century America, as in previous centuries, children were essential for the economic well-being of the family, and we had lots more of them. They helped out on the family farm, did real work in the family business, or generated extra income for the family by getting a job outside the home. Now we have far fewer children, and pay a great deal more attention to each. Our child-centric culture encourages us to view each and every child as, in the words of Princeton sociologist Viviana Zelizer, "economically worthless, but emotionally priceless."

The stereotypical mother of the post–World War II baby boom was encouraged to derive meaning from supporting her husband by maintaining a well-kept home. American mothers in the 1970s and 1980s strived to redefine the value of working motherhood. In contrast, many twenty-first-century American parents seek meaning in their lives and find purpose by making a career out of priming their children for success. Today, instead of being told we should wear high heels and pearls

while vacuuming the house, we worry that by not buying something for our child that will help foster his unique interests, he won't live up to his potential. University of Pennsylvania sociologist Annette Lareau refers to this as "concerted cultivation," the middle- and upper-class parenting strategy of grooming one's own children to achieve excellence and success. Lareau argues that the way we spend money on our children—on their belongings, toys, books, clothes, and extracurricular activities—reflects our commitment to the idea that we should do whatever it takes to help each child cultivate his individual talents.

Kelly and her husband, James, understand this commitment. They live in an upscale community in California with their ten-year-old son and five-year-old daughter. Their son has been playing soccer since he was three years old (his parents pay for club soccer, indoor soccer, and Latin soccer), and he has a closet full of soccer gear: specialized cleats, ten different jerseys, and various other soccer gear, such as shin guards, headbands, water bottles, and soccer bags.

Their daughter also has a room filled with possessions that announce her interests. She sleeps in a French Art Deco–style bed; she has a collection of colorful, trendy "feathers" to clip in her hair, and her closet is full of fashionable clothes and jewelry. She wanted another American Girl doll last Christmas, but her parents drew the line at that since she already had two. Instead, in addition to gifts like a moving toy GoGo My Walkin' Pup, which walks and talks, a Barbie camper van, DVDs, Vans shoes, a makeup kit, a Polly Pocket set, two dresses, a Hello Kitty jacket, and art supplies, she was given a hundred-dollar gift certificate for a mani-pedi at a local spa/salon and a Build-A-Bear gift card.

Parents like Kelly and James strive to support their kids' development. They insist their son play sports and encourage their daughter's taste for fashion and toys that will help foster her imagination. And they're not alone. In their community they are surrounded by parents who cultivate their children's unique selves through classes, activities, and the right material goods. In their area, Kelly told me, "Parents just want the best for their kids."

Most parents, regardless of socioeconomic class, buy things for their

kids because they see how the things kids own become tokens in their social worlds, according to Allison Pugh, a sociologist at the University of Virginia. Kids long for the things that will bring them social acceptance and approval among their peers, like name-brand jeans, trading cards, and the latest electronic games and gadgets. As parents we're keenly attuned to what will help our kids thrive and be happy.

Yet, though we buy into the culture of buying, we probably don't feel entirely good about it. I struggle with the toys our kids lost interest in soon after they got them, the impossibility of keeping the house free of clutter, the worry that our kids will get spoiled. Many of the American subjects of Pugh's research felt similarly ambivalent. They tried to steer their kids away from "inappropriate" toys and games, such as things that were not in good taste, expressed the wrong values, or weren't good for their development. Parents tried to shape and control their children's desires, but it took a lot of energy and didn't always work.

I BUY, THEREFORE I'M HAPPY

In the United States, where we have more shopping centers than high schools, and where 93 percent of teenage girls listed shopping as their favorite activity in a survey, many Americans embrace a consumer-oriented lifestyle. We buy things for pleasure, indulgence, and to keep up with the Joneses. American children get an average of seventy new toys a year. "The messages that children encounter every day are that *the things they buy will make them happy*," says Susan Linn, author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* and director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. "Their worth depends on what they own. They will not be happy unless they have the things that corporations value. And kids are spending a lot of time with those values, because commercialism has infiltrated so much of our lives."

This level of the commercialization of childhood isn't good for children. Having so much stuff, paradoxically, leave kids feeling empty. In her book *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Con-*

sumer Culture, Boston College sociology professor Juliet Schor warns that recreational buying is harmful for all children. A consumer-oriented lifestyle is a significant cause of mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem in children. Materialism has been associated with precocious sexuality, obesity, violence, eating disorders, and a propensity toward impulse buying. Even kids who are psychologically healthy are worse off when they're constantly thinking about what they own, want to buy, or what they long for. "Less involvement in consumer culture leads to healthier kids," Schor writes. Parents have only the best intentions when we buy so much stuff for our children. We don't realize how harmful it is.

Doesn't having money and being able to purchase the things we want make us happy? Yes and no. There is some evidence to suggest that financial security brings more life satisfaction. It's beneficial to know that you will be able to meet your basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, now and in the future. But there's also considerable evidence that a constant pursuit of material fulfillment that goes beyond basic needs actually makes people unhappier. In fact, children of affluent families living in wealthy areas—whose parents have the means to buy them the things that they want—are unhappier than their peers in middle-class neighborhoods (and so are their parents). The satisfaction of buying what you want fades quickly, leading you to hanker after the next shiny new thing.

Consumerism can also harm children's connections with one another. Children have an uncanny sense about what they have and what they need to have to keep up with their peers. And through what social scientists call "invidious comparison," children begin to look down upon those who don't have the right possessions. When her son came home confused one day, saying that the children at school were wondering why the tooth fairy brought a vastly different sum of money to different homes, Hena, a mother of two in Washington, D.C., was disturbed when she realized how much kids compare notes on one another's lives. Our kids do all that whining, begging, and pleading because they are eager not to be left out of the materialist race. When children are highly

aware that status is conveyed by what they own, they become more competitive.

Hena told me that when she was growing up, "There was very little emphasis and expense on the part of my parents to 'entertain' us. We were meant to keep ourselves entertained." She and her siblings were expected to read for pleasure or play games by themselves. Her parents felt no pressure to buy them the latest, greatest thing, such as a VCR, a PC, or an Atari game console.

It's harder for parents now, Hena noted ruefully. She remembers cleaning out her son's drawer once and finding so much stuff: rubber bouncy balls and erasers, debris from birthday goody bags, things he didn't care about. "I told my mom, 'These kids don't value things,' and she told me, 'It's because they have too much.'"

IN JAPAN, LESS IS MORE

When we moved to Japan, I was mystified by the fact that children around us had so few gratuitous personal possessions. Our Japanese friends, in turn, were baffled by why our children had so much. Though we weren't able to take that much with us on our overseas move, our two young boys nevertheless had what seemed, once we arrived, to be a staggering amount of clothing, books, and especially toys: a wooden train set, toy cars, puzzles, toy musical instruments, art supplies, wooden blocks, Legos, dress-up costumes, and more. When my friend Sinae saw that each boy had a bicycle and scooter, in addition to a ride-on toy and a small red wagon they'd received as a gift, she laughed. "How many children do you have living here?"

In Japan, buying a lot of stuff for your children is considered indulgent. Despite the impression Americans may have of Japanese as avid, brand-conscious shoppers, most Japanese people around us lived simply and frugally. Wastefulness was frowned upon. Shopping bags should be saved to reuse many times, not recycled after one purchase. Paper with some blank space on it must be reused as well, cut up small,

used as scrap paper. Japanese tend to be cautious spenders; prices are high in Japan, they live within their means, and personal debt is almost unheard of. Most purchases are made with cash, not on credit.

When it came to raising children, most parents I met felt that it was important to get kids accustomed to less from the start. It is better for their characters, their imagination, their resourcefulness, and their future lives not to experience immediate or excessive material gratification. It wasn't tasteful to spend money to accumulate lots of possessions for your child. Living modestly was a virtue that you wanted to teach your kids, something they could aspire to.

When this was the mindset surrounding you, you couldn't help being influenced by it. Daniel envied his many Japanese friends who had no family car (unlike us) because they made it seem so great that they got to walk everywhere and ride buses and trains. In contrast, a family car seemed boring. When he told his friends Yuya and Leon how many presents kids in the United States received at Christmas, they were incredulous. "I don't know what I'd do with all that," declared nine-year-old Leon. It wasn't even appealing.

Having less enabled kids to appreciate what they did have. One six-year-old girl we knew had only a dollhouse with animal figurines. Two young brothers we knew shared a box of action figures and a small car-and-track set. These few toys were well played with and cherished. We often heard the phrase *mono wo daiji ni suru*, which means to "take really good care of something." Japanese children were constantly reminded that possessions weren't disposable or replaceable, and to treat them with care and appreciation, like the leather backpack all kids receive when entering first grade and are expected to use throughout all six years of elementary school.

Japanese homes are far smaller than our own, and that limited space surely accounts for some of the reluctance to acquire. But we also encountered every day in small ways the notion that children didn't need to have so much. Once my friend handed one tiny packet of cookies to Mia and Anna, even though she had a few extra packets in her purse. She expected the girls to share the packet and knew that each child

didn't need her own. From her perspective, she was doing me a favor by helping to reinforce satisfaction with less and a willingness to share. By contrast, American siblings are sometimes given toys at the same time, or even duplicate toys, to prevent bickering or competition or to just allow each individual child to enjoy his own thing for himself. Any adult who asks them to make do with less risks appearing ungenerous, even stingy. Children learn the phrase "Mine!" almost as soon as they learn to talk.

The Japanese I knew saw scarcity and sharing as one crucial key to cooperation and relationship building. They didn't feel bad about expecting several kids to share one toy. A private bedroom for a child isn't common. Children and adults alike loan things to each other because buying new is used as a last resort. These little everyday things help promote overall goals such as depending on one another, keeping consumption down, and sharing.

Such small, frequent reminders seemed key to taming what I'd thought was universal: a child's desire for more, more, more. The children we knew didn't exhibit the same desires as so many kids we knew back in the United States. They didn't make long holiday or birthday lists of gifts they wanted. They didn't pester their parents for things in stores. They didn't talk incessantly about the things they wanted. They were used to not getting things unless there was a really good reason.

I was used to birthday parties back home, which usually involved lots of kids, pizza and cake, and the crowning glory: a mountain of presents for the birthday child and bagged party favors for the little guests. When we were in Japan, there weren't any birthday parties. Several Japanese moms explained to me that it wasn't typical to celebrate a child's birthday with a party. Occasionally there might be one—one friend mentioned a particularly memorable one she had on her eighth birthday, and others remember celebrating a birthday with a friend or two—but they weren't de rigueur, annual events. Instead, in Japan birthdays are typically celebrated in a low-key way, at home with family, a meal, and a small cake. Japanese don't traditionally give much in the way of presents for birthdays or Christmas to children, though these days it's

become common for families to give their kids a small gift like a book or an action figure.

It's not that the Japanese don't think children's birthdays are important. They just mark them differently. Our Japanese *yochien* (a multi-age school for kids ages three to six), like other *yochiens*, held a communal celebration for *all* the children who had a birthday that month. After a ceremony where they stood up together and each received a handmade card while the other children sang to them, there was a seasonal lunch prepared by parents at the school. The birthday china and tablecloths were brought out, and fresh flowers in small vases adorned the tables. For a Japanese child a birthday was special, not because of what kind of treat was brought to school or the presents he got, but because of the long-awaited, once-a-year-only ceremony and song, the chance to enjoy a moment of recognition together with other friends who shared the same birthday month, and the love and care of a homemade meal.

I noticed that at restaurants, Japanese children didn't seem dependent on toys to distract them as they waited for their meals. (Nor did restaurants hand out crayons and coloring pages to occupy children.) There were no parents pulling out supplies for the little ones in a frantic effort to keep them seated and entertained. It seemed to me that having less made kids more patient. Once I went to a very long, formal, adult-oriented evening event where some families brought their young kids along, and all they had to occupy them were a few sheets of origami. And most kids didn't bring much gear with them to parks or playgrounds.

After a few years in Japan, our kids too became accustomed to less being more. They could occupy themselves with a mere piece of paper—folding it, drawing on it, rolling it up, making jewelry or trinkets out of it. The neighborhood kids often entertained themselves without store-bought toys for hours as they made up variations on tag or hide-and-seek. A pair of socks or some wadded-up newspaper became a ball in a game of catch if there wasn't a real ball available. Children gathered on summer afternoons at the nearby park and fished for crawfish in the pond, devising little traps out of a bit of string, some empty plastic bottles, and tape. These handmade concoctions were more thrilling and gratifying than having brand new store-bought equipment. At school kids created handmade toys to sell at a pretend market—everything from candy and sushi, to flowers, jewelry, watches, and toys—all made of materials straight out of the recycling bin. While the activity was about consumption, children learned in a hands-on, creative way the value of reusing "trash."

The mindset the kids internalized through these daily activities was that you could do so much with so little. Scarcity fostered creative solutions. I wanted to know what parents did to promote this attitude in their kids at home, so I paid a visit to Naomi, a fellow mother at our *yochien*. I asked Naomi if her two children ever asked for things. "Of course they do," she laughed. But it was clear to me from spending time with them that they were remarkably content with what they had. I'd never seen them—or other Japanese children—whine or beg because they wanted to buy something. In her characteristically modest way, Naomi hesitated to consider she might have had anything to do with her children's restrained desire for stuff.

When I persisted, she gave me a few hints. It started, she thought, with instilling a deep awareness and appreciation in children of what they had. "When we go to the park, we don't take toys, buckets, or things like that," she told me. After all, she'd tell her kids, *there is so much already*; why would you need anything more? Kids learn to get hooked on the novelty of acquiring things when this is what they're used to. But they're not born addicted to constant acquisition. For Naomi's daughter Mori, there were the branches and leaves and rocks, there were flowers and bugs to play with and to appreciate. There were the other children to play with too.

As Naomi and Mori walked home from preschool every day, sometimes they'd stop by a store, and sometimes Mori would ask for a treat or a toy. There were times when Naomi would buy her what she wanted, but not always. Instead, she encouraged Mori to pick up something beautiful from the ground on their walk home to bring back to their apartment, maybe a lovely fallen flower, or a nut.

Research shows that simpler, open-ended playthings—things like a simple doll or wooden blocks—are best to foster a child's imagination and creativity. But in the United States, it's hard, if not impossible, to protect our children from the onslaught of single-purpose, branded toys on the market. In 2009 alone, $5.4 billion worth of branded toys were sold to American consumers. But these single-purpose toys circumscribe a child's imagination. Instead of creating their own complex worlds, children become passive players when the world is already predetermined by the manufacturer. But what struck me most in Japan was that children like Mori didn't need any purchased toys at all. There was so much for free right outside her door every day.

I looked around Naomi's sunlit apartment overlooking the Tokyo skyline. By Japanese standards, it was average sized—seven hundred square feet for herself, her husband, and their two children. It wasn't completely devoid of playthings—in one corner there was a small collection of stuffed animals and a few coloring books. Naomi showed me Mori's collection of treasures, which they displayed on a little ceramic plate near the front entrance. Today there was a branch with red berries clinging to it, a small pinecone, and a leaf. Once, Naomi recalled, a mother who had frequently spent time in the United States with her American husband's family asked her why she wasn't buying her kids toys when they were out shopping together, and that was her first inkling that in some cultures, giving kids their own new toys was kind of a normal way to entertain or pacify them. "But I don't think toys are really necessary," Naomi confided.

Naomi wasn't rigid or controlling. Her son got a modest allowance and bought what he wanted to from that—usually small items like trading cards or comic books. When he wanted to see a soccer game once, she had him do extra chores to earn the money to buy tickets. She stressed that it was really necessary to give him a feeling of control over his own life by letting him make small decisions about purchasing what he wanted to while he was young. This would also help him learn the value of money in incremental ways. "It's important to let him make his own decisions about what he wants to buy," she told me earnestly. Naomi encouraged him to pass his small purchases on to someone else to enjoy when he was done with them.

For every Japanese parent I knew, "reuse, reduce, recycle" wasn't a new notion. It was deeply ingrained in their culture and tied to notions of mutual dependence, not just with each other, but a reverence for living lightly on the earth too. Children carry their own handkerchief to dry their hands from the time they're in preschool. Our elementary school even held handkerchief checks. Teachers helped children get into the habit of using reusable cloth instead of paper towels until it was utterly ingrained.

Japanese moms in our area sought out children in the neighborhood to pass their children's clothing down to after it was outgrown. It wasn't solely a practical thing, about reducing waste or being frugal. It was also that it was special to wear a dress that a child they knew had worn. "The children feel much affection when they wear clothes already worn in, played in, by someone else," Naomi explained. It's nice both for the giver, generously passing something down, and the receiver, proud to wear something an admired older child had once worn. Now I understood the frequent clothing exchanges I'd seen in schoolyards at pickup. These clothes were infused with a personal history that connected people with one another in a way that donating used clothing anonymously to a charity, as we might do in the United States, cannot.

Though some Japanese, especially those who are more affluent or have spent time abroad, have started to emulate Western values and clutter their houses with stuff, it's easy to imagine how children who grow up in a society where there are few store-bought toys, but ample time and encouragement to make playthings, don't automatically need to buy things to feel satisfaction. As I walked home with a bag full of hand-me-down dresses for Anna that Naomi had pressed into my hands, I realized that in Japan, being a good parent meant teaching your children to be frugal, resourceful, and restrained in their desires. Being a good parent meant helping kids to understand that happiness can never be bought.

FRENCH LESSONS IN DELAYED GRATIFICATION

In Japan, where we were surrounded by kids like Naomi's, it was easier for us to show our children the value in living less materialistically, even though it continued to be a work in progress for our family. Kate, an English mother who is raising two young children in France along with her French partner, understands how being surrounded by a different ethos makes the job of a parent easier in some ways. She noticed a striking contrast between France and the UK fairly early on in her stay in France. "I don't think there is this massive pressure to buy all the time," she told me. All families are different, but in general, she mused, in France, "I don't think value is found in what you purchase. I think it's found in your sense of family, how you bring your children up to be able to operate in the world like sentient adults."

Kate's partner used to quote a common French phrase: *C'est moi qui décide.* "It's me who decides." Kate posted the phrase on her refrigerator as a reminder to herself, once she saw that her children seemed just as happy when they didn't have so much focus on their wants and demands. She was always responsive to their emotional needs: fear, anger, sadness, but Kate also grew to recognize that it was possible to be responsive in these important ways while also taking the lead in shaping desires and wants. She told me that "Children need to learn how to become adults. That means learning that sometimes you have to wait. Sometimes you don't get what you want right away, the first moment you want it." This held true whether it was about emotional or material desires.

Another French parent, Gilles, agreed. His two boys, ages eight and five, have their share of material goods. They have toys that they love to play with and that foster open-ended, imaginative play. But his boys are not at all demanding—they are content with what they have. Their lives are satisfying—they read a lot, and have the opportunity to learn music and play sports. Still, Gilles tells me parents in France are subject to a lot

of consumer pressure. There are always things one must buy: clothes, or prams and other baby gear. Some parents like to buy a lot more than others. But even so, there are some general differences between France and the United States, where the perceived image is that of the *bébé roi*, "child as king." Such a child must have everything, right away, in order to be *comblé*: satisfied and fulfilled in material and emotional ways.

In contrast, in France, there is an idea that "frustrating" children is good for them. *"On les fustre,"* Gilles said. "We frustrate them." French parents, he explained, deny their children things or make them wait for things they may want. Sometimes it means delaying gratification for years, maybe because it's not the right time, there's no money, or simply because the toy isn't considered appropriate. This is a pretty common approach in France that's widely understood to be for the child's benefit. If you don't teach a child to wait, or that they can't have everything, "they will never understand the kind of satisfaction that comes from waiting." If you give a child what he desires right away, then the child is at risk of becoming *boulimique*, always needing to have more, more, more.

Rachel, a Canadian mother who has spent time in France with her partner's French family, also experienced quite different expectations around indulging children with stuff. "The French Christmases we've shared there are nothing like the deluge of stuff we expect in North America," she told me. "Gifts are well chosen, well wrapped, and the ritual of opening them is watched by all, accompanied by a round of kisses and careful thank-yous. Then, the feast is the formal centerpiece of the event.

"But I think that ties into French discipline generally," she mused, "where all is to be thoroughly enjoyed—with strict limits and at the proper time, and where excess and gluttony are taboo. There is really something to be learned from this, at the table and at the toy store."

THE TYRANNY OF CHOICE

Yet, one of the best things about contemporary culture is that we have so many choices. Paper or plastic, blue cheese or Thousand Island, BlackBerry or iPhone. Our children prepare to make important decisions when they're older by making smaller decisions now. Choice is good for our kids and good for us. Isn't it?

Actually, no. When we are faced with decisions about what to buy, our consumer habits actually affect our brains. Retailers are well aware of this brain science and seek to appeal to the side of our brains that loves novelty, while muffling the part of our brain that advises moderation. They employ a variety of strategies: everything from putting an expensive item next to the item they really want to sell you (thus making you think you're getting a bargain), to extending easy credit (which inhibits your cautious side, since plastic doesn't feel like "real money"), to cloaking items in a "halo" of attractive words ("wholesome," "educational"). The problem is that once we buy, the thrill soon dissipates and we're back on what researchers call a hedonic treadmill: like addicts, we seek to re-create that initial thrill by making additional purchases.

Few families in the world are as vulnerable to the desire to buy as American families are. Though commercialism is a modern, global phenomenon, it affects American children disproportionately because corporations have benefited from deregulation against marketing directly to children, which began in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan. The open access to marketing directly to children too young to distinguish reality from fantasy, combined with an explosion in digital media, has given marketers multiple platforms to gain access to the youngest consumers.

American children see more than 25,000 advertisements on television a year. Advertisements for junk food, soda, and branded or electronic toys can be found on cell phones, MP3 players, the Internet, video games, and e-readers. They can be seen in preschools and on school buses and even in report cards. Companies carefully research how children

gain information, how much time they spend online, and who influences them the most.

Kids are uniquely vulnerable to marketing because they can't tell the difference between content that's informational or entertaining and content that's trying to sell them something, whether on television or on the Internet (and in fact, the Internet is even more effective for marketing to kids, because they are more actively engaged in their online experiences). By the age of two, they begin to recognize logos and associate them with the products that are being peddled, and by the time they go to elementary school they recognize hundreds of logos. The current generation of kids is the most brand-conscious ever, and teenagers talk about brands an average of 145 times per week, about twice as much as adults do.

In order to capture the youngest markets, corporations go directly between parents and their children. It's no coincidence that the American media often portray adults, especially parents, teachers, or other authority figures, as foolish, old-fashioned, and out of touch in comparison to sophisticated, cool, savvy kids. Marketing directly to kids by denigrating adults is a successful and popular strategy. It helps encourage young kids to be precociously mature and consider it normal to act disdainfully toward their own parents. That whining and nagging that kids do to get the things they want isn't happening just because they're spoiled, as parents might despair, but as the result of well-honed marketing strategies taking advantage of "pester power"—a proven way to sell consumer goods (and a clear contributor to family stress).

Family strife over consumer desires isn't a given, as harried American parents feel it must be. Children's well-being and their relationships with others are better in countries where corporate power is weaker, as Tim Kasser's research shows. Kasser, a psychology professor at Knox College and author of *The High Price of Materialism*, was traveling in the UK in 2007 when a major UNICEF report was released assessing the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in twenty-one wealthy industrialized nations. The UK ranked last, which made the news over there. (The United States ranked second to last, a point largely ignored

here.) Kasser decided to use the UNICEF data in a cross-national study to evaluate whether cultural values and societal goals influenced how nations care for their children. He found that nations that value equality and harmony provide better lives for their kids than do nations that emphasize money, power, and achievement values associated with free-market-oriented economies, like America's. It's rather difficult, he told me on the phone, for a nation to be simultaneously corporate-friendly and promote the well-being of children, given that these two aims are often at odds.

"When people are focused on money, status, and power, they tend to be less happy," Kasser explained. This is true at the level of nations as well. Children living in nations that de-emphasized money values and prioritized egalitarian values enjoyed better well-being, and their families benefited from more generous parental leave policies and less advertising aimed at kids. "Nations that emphasize equality and love rather than money and power probably provide a variety of different kinds of supports for children and their families, like shorter work hours, adequate health care, well-funded schools, and family-friendly urban spaces, rather than focusing on activities like going shopping and making money," Kasser continued. "By doing so, it seems that their children are happier and healthier."

HOW TO OWN LESS AND LIVE MORE

So what's a parent to do? How do we deal with formidable cultural forces, and limit what we buy for our children without making them feel deprived? What can we learn from other cultures where consumerism isn't so rampant? The first step is to recognize and trust that providing less for our kids really is a viable pathway to things that matter too, things—such as creativity, resourcefulness, moderation, self-restraint, and self-satisfaction—that kids carry with them far longer into their future lives than the material goods they ask for today.

When I had my first child, I got caught up in buying all the right

things, because I believed that those right things would guarantee the best childhood for him. I wish I could talk to the uncertain new mom I was then and explain to her that all our little boy really needed was our love, attention, and time, and that despite the relentless advertising, there was no material object that I could have bought for him that would be worth as much as that.

Every child needs things within reason, but not every want is a need. Saying no is the hardest part of being a parent. But it's our job to set those boundaries so we can teach kids how to set them for themselves. If we say yes too often, we're depriving our kids: of knowing how to be satisfied with less; of freedom from unmanageable clutter; of the satisfaction of working toward and saving up for something they really want.

Global examples can teach us a valuable lesson for ourselves as well as our children. We don't need the best car, the latest iPod, or the fanciest dinnerware to be happy. And neither do our children. Although modern American culture tries to convince us that through buying stuff we can perfect our kids' performance, happiness, and overall self-esteem, we can be smarter than the corporations who care most about their profits. The best way to make our kids happy is by providing them with less.

THREE

GLOBAL FOOD RULES: How Parents Around the World Teach Their Kids to Eat

There are only a few foods that twelve-year-old Robbie from Pennsylvania is willing to eat. Mealtimes at home are a battle. His mother, Cathy, a concerned and determined parent, has tried many things over the years. When Robbie was little, he spat broccoli out on the table. Years later the only vegetable Robbie eats is mashed potatoes. He doesn't like fruit either. Cathy tries to keep unhealthy food to a minimum in her house, but at the same time she wants Robbie to eat. At five feet tall, he weighs eighty pounds, and she's worried he is undernourished. Even Robbie's doctor has told him he has to make better food choices.

These days his mom buys foods he will eat even though she knows they aren't healthy: kettle popcorn, Cheez-Its, toasted ravioli, Fruit Roll-Ups. It's a constant dance of providing him with food he *will* eat while also trying to urge him to eat better. Last week Cathy tried to entice him with a barbecue she prepared for the whole family—tomato, basil, and mozzarella salad; rice; grilled steak, chicken, and sausage; grilled vegetables; corn on the cob. When she looked at Robbie's plate, all he had taken was a small piece of meat.

Parents across America can relate to Cathy's struggles and her frustration. We all want our children to have healthy diets, but we don't know how to teach them to eat well, for a whole host of reasons. When our children refuse foods, we label them as picky eaters, believing that they won't ever change their habits. If one day they say they don't like tomatoes, we think that means they will never like tomatoes. In addition to having finicky eaters, many of us find it hard to make time to cook. We ourselves may have grown up eating Lucky Charms for breakfast, hamburgers and fries for lunch, and Kraft macaroni and cheese for dinner; and so many families lead such busy lives that we have no time for sit-down family dinners. The problem is compounded by the fact that convenience foods are often the ones children like best. Although we know it's better to make food from scratch and serve our kids fresh, whole foods, it's just so much easier and so much less of a struggle to buy ready-made foods. It's no wonder that so many American children, like Robbie, end up with spectacularly unhealthy eating habits. But isn't that just how most kids are?

As a culture, we don't do a great job supporting healthy eating or parents who want to feed their kids well. Evidence suggests that in the last few decades American children's diets, notoriously poor, have actually been getting worse. Nearly 40 percent of the calories American kids consume are empty calories—sugar and fat—and half of those are from junk and fast food. People in our nation eat more packaged food than people from any other country—lots of it frozen pizza and snack foods. Processed foods are full of unhealthy ingredients such as high-fructose corn syrup, which pumps our bodies full of more glucose than we can process, and petroleum-based artificial food dyes, which require warning labels in European countries. This kind of diet may even negatively affect our brains: A study of nearly four thousand children in the

UK (where kids are susceptible to similar food temptations as our own) found that eating a fat, sugar, or processed-food diet at age three was directly linked to lower IQ at age eight.

Food manufacturers spend enormous amounts of money to market their products to even the youngest eaters. "Dora!" a two-year-old cries when she sees her favorite explorer (and sidekick Boots) on a Yoplait Kids yogurt package. The labels are brightly colored and appealing, and the foods are advertised directly to children on television and the Internet. Supermarkets often put these kid-friendly foods at a child's eye level so a child will be more likely to take them off the shelves and put them in the grocery cart when a parent's back is turned. There are even popular Cheerios board books for toddlers that teach them to recognize the cereal brand while learning how to count or helping monkeys juggle by putting the cereal in the right spaces.

It's not just what kids eat, but how much. In the past thirty years, portion sizes have grown astronomically: a cookie today is 700 percent bigger than it was in the 1970s. Our kids get used to eating more—one study shows young children eat more when they're given larger portions. American children today eat almost two hundred more calories daily than they did in 1977, and most of this increase comes from unhealthy foods. Though the processed and unhealthy foods in the school cafeteria or school vending machines have gotten a lot of blame for American children's poor diets, a recent study shows that children's dietary habits are more likely to be formed outside school, in their homes and neighborhoods. Their diets get even worse as they get older and have more opportunities to eat on their own.

The price our children pay for their poor eating habits is dear. Today about one out of three kids is overweight or obese, which puts them at risk for a range of serious health issues. Our children are the first in centuries who might live shorter lives than their parents as a direct result of childhood obesity. Even children who aren't necessarily overeating or who don't look obese are suffering ill effects from unhealthy eating.

ARE WE GIVING CHILDREN TOO MANY CHOICES ABOUT WHAT TO EAT?

Not all of us eat unhealthily. In fact, many parts of our country have become a friendly place for people following any sort of healthy diet: vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, paleo, raw food. This sort of eating is marked by *personal choice*. It's the right to "have it your way." We cherish the right to eat what we want to, when we want to. This is a good thing for people with religion-based dietary restrictions or food allergies, who are usually met with sympathy and offered alternatives. But while America's strength is to have so many choices and such an emphasis on personal freedom, it can also be our downfall (in the food department, anyway).

When personal choice is the guiding principle for how we eat, it (understandably) feels hypocritical and wrong to tell children what to eat. But when children feel entitled to choose what and when they eat, and when they subsequently refuse to eat what the family is eating, dinnertime can become an unpleasant power struggle. In a study aptly titled "Why Is This a Battle Every Night? Negotiating Food and Eating in American Dinnertime Interaction," Amy Paugh of James Madison University and Carolina Izquierdo of UCLA pored over some 250 hours of videotape of five dual-income middle-class families in Southern California. Dialogue after dialogue described families struggling—ranging from a nearly seven-minute negotiation between two kids and their parents over milk versus lemonade (in the end, one child drank the two mixed together), to a prolonged back-and-forth where a parent asked her son what he wanted to eat as he was rooting around in the fridge, but then rejected his repeated request for Jell-O while trying to get him to eat tuna or salmon.

By offering many options (and then disapproving of what our children say they want) we run the risk of *socializing our kids to fight with us over eating*. Children are left "with no clear message of which choice is

the 'healthy' one," write Paugh and Izquierdo, and our authority as parents diminishes. "These interactions point to an uneasiness with which these middle-class American parents approach issues of authority and control," they continue. We hate to seem too authoritative, but we don't know what to do when we don't like what our kids choose to eat.

In our country, feeding our kids is marked by extremes. Lots of us rely heavily on the processed "kids'" foods so readily available in our supermarkets and convenience stores. It's common for young kids to eat a separate repertoire of kids' foods or even eat separately from the adults. Parents, short of time and convinced their children are picky eaters who will reject healthy options, simultaneously despair of and accept their child's choices and limited palate. Parents themselves often have no healthy food tradition to draw from, and they tell themselves that picky eating is normal and there's not much they can do about it, because that's how most children they know eat. Parenting magazines assure us that it's normal for young kids to be finicky and that kids will self-regulate and get the nutrition they need if adults leave them alone.

On the other hand, our unhealthy food culture compels well-meaning parents to be extremely vigilant about the foods their kids are allowed to eat, belying that healthily relaxed attitude toward food that we want to teach our kids to have. Any conscientious parent who opens a newspaper or magazine or surfs the Internet can't help worrying about what she—and her children—eat.

Susan, who was always careful about what her son ate and faithfully followed a diet consisting of lots of bone broth and fermented foods (both thought to be good to promote healthy gut flora and good digestion), methodically picked grains of sugar, one by one, off a muffin at a birthday party, before allowing it into her toddler's hands. As a new mom, I too tried to keep my toddler from eating artificial dyes, refined sugar, or white flour. But when I offered Susan and her son a bag of dried oranges that my mother had made for us, she bit into one, asked if

it was organic, and when I told her I wasn't sure, spat it out with a horrified expression and handed the bag back to me.

Other parents I knew were constantly frustrated about their children's picky eating. They traded recipes for ways to sneak vegetables into everything from spaghetti sauce to brownies, complained that their children ate only white foods, made grazing bars by putting out different foods (fruits, vegetables, crackers, and pretzels) in ice cube trays so their kids didn't have to stop playing but could go back and forth to the table, picking and choosing what to eat, and lamented how difficult it was to get children to eat well. They talked about food in terms of its components: Were their kids getting enough bites of protein, enough fiber? These American parents (Susan and myself included) have nothing but the best intentions. We want to help our children develop healthy habits and good attitudes toward food. For good reason: rather than growing out of their eating habits, the habits children establish at a young age form their eating patterns for the rest of their lives.

THE JAPANESE WAY OF EATING

Before we moved to Japan, we visited Tokyo several times and stayed with a friend and her two boys. Yuri, vivacious and cheerful, was a gourmet cook who made Japanese dishes from scratch in her small kitchen. She made a miso soup daily from freshly grated dried bonito (a fish popular in Japan) and kelp stock, and even sent me back to the United States with my own tools (and a gigantic hunk of dried bonito) so I could make the same thing. Daniel, at just eighteen months, loved her soup so much he would silently toddle back to her holding out his empty bowl to her to ask for more.

But even though her meals were all from scratch, with produce and meat or fish bought fresh in small amounts every day at the local market, when Japanese mothers got together at Yuri's house they were very relaxed about what their kids ate for afternoon snack. Once a neighbor-

hood mother kindly handed three-year-old Benjamin a piece of candy as she was passing it out to other kids. He'd never had candy before. I took it away before he'd notice what it was, much to her astonishment. Japanese friends were amused by my attempt to keep Benjamin from tasting ice cream, at least until he was older.

My vigilance didn't make a lot of sense to them. Of course, food was important for health, but it was also meant for pleasure. As long as meals were wholesome and healthy and freshly made—what did a piece of candy or some ice cream during the afternoon really matter? The idea of monitoring what children were eating to this degree seemed strange to my Japanese friends. One of my friends referred to me as a super-healthy eater—not exactly a compliment. It seemed to imply I was obsessed and controlling. But I in turn felt confused by their laxness. Didn't they know that sugar was addictive? Didn't they worry about artificial food dyes?

Yet I suspected there was something to learn from the Japanese way of eating. After all, Japan has the lowest obesity rate in the world (4 percent, tied with South Korea) and is famed for its population's health and longevity. After I moved to Japan, I discovered that the whole concept of food and what purpose it served seemed different from the very beginning, starting with how babies were taught to eat.

One muggy summer morning I biked over to our neighborhood community center to meet Akiko, a serene mother of a plump and active toddler named Takeru.

Takeru was born in the United States, and the young family had just moved back to Japan a few weeks before. Akiko got a lot of feeding advice from her American pediatrician. She was told to start him on rice cereal and jarred fruits or vegetables like apples, and to give vitamins and iron supplements. She was a little surprised by these recommendations. Japanese aren't typically in the habit of taking daily vitamins or nutritional supplements and almost never give them to their children, because they strongly believe they should get their nourishment from the food they eat.

Akiko decided to start her baby on solids the Japanese way instead,

relying on advice from friends and family back home. She introduced him to food around six months, though she still primarily breast-fed him—her friends had advised her not to rush into solids. Good first foods for a baby were rice porridge (made from real rice, boiled with lots of water), small bits of fish, and little bits of boiled pumpkin.

It wasn't just important to feed a baby seasonally, it would have been impossible not to. In Japan, many vegetables and fruits aren't available in grocery stores at all unless they're in season. You can't buy grapes in the winter, so they become a delicacy to look forward to when they come out in late summer for a brief time. The same goes for Asian pears, asparagus, and Japanese broad beans.

Vegetables, like bamboo, burdock root, carrot, or potato, were often simmered in a light broth made of kelp or anchovies called *dashi*, so that babies could get used to this taste, characteristic of Japanese cuisine. As Takeru grew, dishes would include bits of other foods: *hijiki* (a kind of seaweed), *natto* (fermented soybeans), and udon noodles.

What baby ate was important. But just as important was the attitude toward feeding a child. Eating in Japan is a communal matter, even for the youngest set. Babies should *never* eat alone. "We should give them the pleasure of feeling like part of the family when they eat," Akiko told me. Even when her baby was too young to eat solids, Akiko had always kept him with her and her husband at mealtimes, and as he got older he ate together with them. This was just a cardinal rule.

To make babies feel even more like a part of the family, parents give them the same foods as everyone else. Now I realized why we hardly ever saw children's menus in Japanese restaurants. From the time babies start eating, they're eating the same things as adults. The food is more lightly seasoned, or otherwise modified for the baby's age, but other than that, the basic ingredients are the same. If parents are eating a beef and potato stew, a baby might eat the same foods, a bit blander, and cut in small pieces. If parents are eating teriyaki salmon, pickled vegetables, rice, and miso soup, a toddler would eat similar things in smaller portions.

Akiko made her baby separate dishes sometimes. His favorites, at age eleven months, were pasta tossed with soybean powder, and little

fish balls in broth. He also loved fermented soybeans and tomatoes, and usually had a bowl of miso soup with tofu and spring onions at dinner. In Japan presentation always matters; gifts are carefully wrapped, food is presented beautifully. This applies even to food for the youngest children. When food is appealingly prepared and laid out, with an ideal mix of colors and textures, Japanese parents say a baby will be more likely to eat it.

When we said good-bye, Akiko gave me a parting gift: a popular Japanese book about feeding babies, called *Meals to Feed Your Baby That Will Also Nurture His Heart.* It outlined some of the basic principles of feeding young children: help children to feel gratitude for the food that nourishes them. Be equally attentive to nurturing your child's heart as well as his body. Pleasant meals will help a child's heart to grow abundant and rich.

THREE PROPER MEALS A DAY

In Japan the thinking is to introduce young kids to a wide variety of tastes and textures, teach them to appreciate food, teach them never to waste, and get them used to *structured mealtimes* and mealtime behavior. Unlike the casualness that we might see in the United States, infant and toddler feeding is a more serious, concerted business in Japan, and it's the adults who decide on the menu and wield the spoons.

At the *yochien,* wasting food was so frowned upon that children were expected to eat everything. If they didn't, teachers would let parents know, so they could adjust the amounts of food they packed in their children's lunches accordingly, and achieve the right balance of vegetables, rice, bits of fish or meat, and cut-up fruit that was healthy but also appealing to the individual child. While at first I found it intrusive and almost unbelievable that teachers were telling me how to feed my child, I grew to appreciate their involvement. It was so much easier to get our children to eat healthily when it was expected of them in environments

other than our own. Parents and teachers were a team, helping to raise children who learned to eat.

We were surprised by the fact that so many people ate three square meals. Portions overall were small, but each meal was balanced and filling. There was often salad at breakfast, in addition to savory foods or soups, broiled fish, rice, and fermented pickles. Lunch was always hot, usually not a cold sandwich. Dinner was more of the same. It was important to satisfy more than just one's hunger: there was as much attention paid to aesthetics and presentation as to nutrition.

Strollers in Japan didn't usually have cup or snack holders, because kids weren't snacking while being strolled around. Random grazing and snacking, overall, was frowned upon as bad manners—as it is in many countries throughout the world—because of the general societal insistence on eating etiquette: not eating while standing or walking; not grabbing food, but waiting to be served; and eating without comment or complaint what was put in front of you. When food was eaten, it was an occasion. Kids sat down, their hands were wiped with a wet towel, and then they could eat. (Though I did frequently see small bits of candy distributed to toddlers to keep them quiet during PTA meetings.)

There were never any snacks served at our children's *yochien* except for occasional, seasonal treats: a green bean just plucked from the school garden (which children helped tend every day), a freshly harvested, roasted sweet potato after the annual sweet potato–harvesting field trip, or tart *natsumikan* (Japanese tangerine) gelatin that the teachers made once a year in the winter from the schoolyard's fruit tree, when tangerines burst into season. At first I thought of this as awfully austere. But our kids looked forward to these treats because they were rare and presented as a special privilege.

A typical school day for our three-year-olds stretched from nine to two, with nothing to eat during those hours but their *obento* lunch, since their meals were supposed to be substantial enough to sustain them. In *yochien,* children were taught carefully how to get out their lunches, spread out their lunch mats, sit with classmates at meals, and take the

time to enjoy eating together and talking with each other and with their teachers, who were also modeling the art of sitting down to enjoy a meal. They were taught to wait until everyone was ready to begin eating. After saying *itadakimasu* (thank you for this food), everyone could start. Then the children were expected to wait at their seats until everyone was done with the meal.

I was used to a more casual approach, and sometimes I thought this formality was too much. Charming for a meal or two here or there, but every single time people sat to eat? But when I saw even my own kids feel at home with what I thought looked like so much formality and ceremony, my mind opened to the possibility that there was something to be learned from a slower, more ritualistic attitude toward food. They *liked* it. It made eating an event, something special. It signaled, I'm worth a good, sit-down meal. I realized that making each meal an event provides a different kind of nourishment.

In the United States, it's typical for elementary kids to get no more than twenty-five minutes to eat, total—including the time it takes to stand in line and use the bathroom. Nutrition experts worry that feeling rushed is contributing to our nation's obesity problem. On Daniel's first day of American school after five years away, he had to be specifically told that it was okay to start eating as soon as he got his own lunch out. He'd been waiting for everyone to be seated, and was confused about why some kids were already unwrapping their sandwiches or bags of chips or pretzels and digging in. He also had to learn to eat a lot faster. He'd been used to forty-minute lunches every day, which is the typical time allotted in Japanese schools.

"BE GRATEFUL FOR YOUR FOOD"

As a twenty-one-year-old exchange student living in Japan for the first time, I first heard the words "Don't leave even a single grain of rice in your rice bowl" from my host family in a small village in central Japan. It was hard for me not to leave grains of rice in my own bowl, because I

was so accustomed to the widespread American notion that healthy eating meant giving yourself permission not to have to clean your plate. But my host family was eating rice they'd harvested themselves from a paddy in their front yard. They knew how much time and effort growing and harvesting each grain of rice entailed.

While our collective national memory of widespread food insecurity ends with the Depression, for older adults in Asia and Europe, starvation, hardship, and rationing are real, living memories of World War II and the difficulties of the decade that followed. One of my friends, raised as a child in Japan but now living in the United States, told me it still hurts her heart to see waste on American plates.

In Japan it was considered a *moral good* to teach kids to eat properly, and it was also an adult's job to teach children the concept of gratitude for every bit of food on their plates. All children were taught to think of the animal who provided the meat, the farmer who grew the produce, the person who made and served the food. They were taught to always remember the interconnected cycle that made it possible for them to eat this meal. Japanese encouraged children to eat everything they were served, to try everything they were given. To achieve this, parents served many different kinds of foods. They held spoons up to little mouths. They spoke highly of kids who ate anything. They said, "Just try one bite," or "Just try half." They encouraged little children to finish: one common phrase was "Let's eat everything" (but at the same time, portions were far smaller than they tend to be in the United States). I went to PTA meetings where parents sat around and one by one expressed their hope that their children would be able to accomplish the elementary-school milestone of being able to eat everything in their school lunch.

Paying so much attention to what children ate, and that they ate fully, well, and without complaint—such an ingrained attitude in the culture was difficult for me to understand. Don't they worry about eating disorders or food hang-ups? I wondered. Don't they care about respecting their children's personal choices? Wasn't this too much coaxing and pressure?

BEING ABLE TO EAT ANYTHING—NOT EATING ANYTHING YOU WANT

Back home, I'd known moms like Regina and Diane who talked and thought a lot about how their children ate too. When they would get together, their conversations focused around what their children preferred. But it was different from the Japanese parents. For Regina and Diane, their quest was to figure out what their children liked so they could accommodate them. They looked at their children's tastes as innate and accepted there were certain foods they wouldn't eat. They strived to work around this. They didn't have high expectations that their kids would try new things, because understanding and respecting their children's individual desires and wishes was the mark of a good parent.

In Japan, there's a different mindset around food: A parent's job isn't to figure out how to meet the challenge of keeping her child's diet reasonably healthy while letting him eat anything he wants to. A good parent helps her children *learn to eat anything*, and she believes they can and will become good eaters, through high expectations, patience (you don't give up trying a new food after just a few times), beautifully crafted meals (like Japanese bentos), and lots of exposure to new foods. Kids could never learn to eat widely if parents didn't give them the chance. The kids couldn't just say they couldn't eat this or that, and expect the parents to just stop serving it. In Japan, parents didn't worry as much about trampling on their children's personal choice or individual inclinations. They were confident they were doing their kids a favor by teaching them to eat well. Kids spoke positively about and ate a wide variety of foods, from octopus balls to sushi, from red bean desserts to seaweed salad. Scores of children dug into their meals with gusto, without complaint, and really seemed to enjoy eating.

Of course everyone had preferences, things they loved as well as things that "weren't their favorites" (as they were taught to politely refer to dishes they didn't care for). But overall, the kids I saw were anything

but picky eaters, and when all your friends were like this, you couldn't help being affected by it too. Children even coaxed one another to try new things. Instead of viewing it as normal to have a lot of preferences about your food, our kids started to see it as normal, admirable, and a sign of maturity to be *willing to try anything*.

The way kids eat in Japan and America is so different in so many ways that it's a constant topic of conversation among our kids, who are fascinated by the differences. "In America, you can eat your dessert first if you want to," Daniel once remarked soon after we'd moved back from Japan. "Well, of course, no one cares—it's your own lunch," Benjamin responded.

In America, food is an expression of who you are as an individual. But Syra, an American mother living in Japan, understands the peace that can come with not having to make constant decisions that define you and your singular values about eating, and the freedom that comes from knowing you are able to enjoy eating just about anything: "The set lunches in Japan have always tickled me. You just order one of them, and that's it. Ordering a meal in America can take ten minutes sometimes! While I appreciate being able to get blue cheese dressing on the side when I go home, I also love saying, 'I'll have the grilled fish,' and having everything decided for me."

FOOD EDUCATION

I grew to learn that what made it easier for parents to raise healthy eaters was the consistent support that they got from others. It wasn't just up to them.

Shokuiku—"food education"—is woven throughout school life for every Japanese child. The national curriculum is standardized, so most kids experience the same kind of food education. Our kids helped tend the rooftop garden as preschoolers at *yochien*. All children grow their own tomatoes, eggplants, and cucumbers in first grade. They study soybeans for weeks during one language unit in third grade (by the time

both our boys went through third grade at the local public elementary school, our whole family was thoroughly familiar with just how soybeans become soy sauce, miso, tofu, and fermented soybeans).

By fifth and sixth grades, children are learning cooking basics at school too. I watched cooking class one summer morning, arriving at school just as they'd started preparing their meal. The kids, wearing bandannas on their heads and aprons, were sitting in groups of four or five. Each table was outfitted with a gas burner, two gleaming chef's knives, a pile of vegetables, raw eggs, and a few assorted small bowls.

Today's assignment was boiled eggs and warm vegetable salad with dressing. After brief words of encouragement from the teacher, the room exploded into activity as the children were let loose. They quickly divvied up their tasks—some kids were busily chopping, others cooking or measuring ingredients, others were at the sinks washing up utensils and dishes. The room echoed with lively conversation and activity. As I watched them enjoy themselves so thoroughly, I understood why one survey of Japanese students shows that home ec is their second most favorite class, after physical education.

Kids in Japan have longer school days and a longer school year than U.S. kids. They even go to school every other Saturday morning. But overall, they have fewer hours of actual academic instruction than American kids do. The longer school days mean that there is room for extras in the schedule that many U.S. schools have cut back on. All Japanese schools, whether public or private, can afford the time to nurture skills they believe are important for the whole child—such as physical education, art, music, and self-reliance skills such as cooking, how to do laundry, and how to sew. "Food education" makes it possible for parents not to have to worry they must monitor their children's eating in order to keep them healthy. A 2012 study of fifth-grade children in Canada found that the more often the kids helped to prepare and cook meals, the more likely they were to eat vegetables and fruits and to feel they were capable of making healthy food choices.

Elementary-school lunch is the most important part of Japanese "food education." Lunch is an actual class, part of the Japanese national

curriculum. It's a class to teach children where food comes from, how to enjoy a meal, and how to serve others. At our school, as at all Japanese elementary schools, a different group of children were in charge of serving lunch to their classmates each week. They donned a special outfit, hat, and mask, and dished out rice, soup, vegetables, and entrées in the classroom. Lunch is supposed to be a relaxing time, to learn how to enjoy eating together. Most days, sixth-graders presented a program over loudspeakers piping into each room—they told a joke or riddle, sang songs, or played some music. After lunch, when kids cleaned everything up, they flattened their milk cartons carefully before recycling them, and stuck their straws, and straw wrappers, in other bins. The children themselves wiped down the tables, swept the floors, and returned the food trolleys to the kitchen. Then they ran outside to play.

One day I stopped by the school to meet the school nutritionist and the school nurse. A truck had just rumbled down the narrow alleyway to the school to deliver the daily ration of fresh produce for lunch. Today's lunch would be summer vegetable curry, soup, and homemade sponge cake for dessert. Ms. Yoshida, the nutritionist, plans all the meals each month according to season. She likes to mix up the menu with a few selections of ethnic meals—Korean fried rice, or Indian curry, or Italian spaghetti, for instance—but she emphasizes regional Japanese culture too and serves rice three times a week. She includes plenty of variety to keep kids interested in their meals.

Ms. Yoshida and Ms. Noda, the school nurse, help the children to understand that what they eat helps their bodies grow. They take this role seriously. "Elementary school is when kids are really forming healthy habits for life," Ms. Noda told me. The kids see the three cooks at the school every day, cutting and cooking the ingredients that will become meals for one hundred students and all the teachers, through big windows in the hallway on the first floor that open up into the kitchen. This makes an impression—as it's meant to. "I can't believe," Benjamin would tell me in genuine amazement, "that three people make lunch for so many people every day."

After we spoke, I went to watch the school cooks myself. They'd

just cut up a mountain of eggplant for the summer curry. There was homemade fish stock for the soup, and one person was whipping up, by hand, a daunting amount of sponge-cake batter to put in the oven.

In keeping with the idea that too many choices actually make it harder for kids to learn to eat widely, children are not offered choices at lunch. Our kids got used to this quickly. They just tried what they were given for lunch every day. "You'd think you're not going to like something, like these little beans covered in glazed pellets of crispy little fish," Daniel recalls, "but it's really good when you try it." Kids have second helpings if there is food left over, but only if they've tried everything. If there isn't enough for everyone to get a second helping, the kids play rock-paper-scissors to determine who got the rest. This got raucous when there was a popular dish on the menu.

Not choosing makes the moments when you do choose feel extra special. The boys and their classmates looked forward to the time, once a year on the last day before summer vacation began, when they'd get to eat a "select sorbet" at school lunch. In fact, they were asked to place their order a month before: Would it be apple, orange, or pineapple? They discussed their choices with their classmates. They looked forward to it over the next few weeks. It was exciting, alluring, and special because it wasn't an everyday thing.

SWEDEN: MAKING CHOICES HELPS YOU PRACTICE HOW TO MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES

In Japan, deciding some things for your children is a sign of parental love, a sign you're thinking about them and what's good for them. In Sweden, it is the opposite: parents show their children love by allowing them to choose for themselves. But both countries manage to raise children who eat better than most Americans.

Swedes tell me that it's common for people in their country to stop by the store for fresh ingredients before coming home and cooking dinner. Meals are slow, and shorter work hours and a decent work-life balance (one of the best in the world) make it easier for most families to take the time to cook together, to talk about food together. Swedes are healthy, even in comparison with other Nordic people: at birth a female can be expected to live to eighty-four years, and only one person in ten is obese.

When Mikaela, a Swedish teenager, was growing up, her mother always told her, "You can have anything you want from the fridge" (which was filled with healthy and nourishing foods). In Sweden, Mikaela told me, feeding children is about encouraging their autonomy, not monitoring them or evaluating everything they want to eat. Instead, kids are given a lot of freedom about what they eat. Her mother never told her to eat this or that only for snack.

But here's the thing: She was given choices, *but she'd never make wrong choices.* "You can have whatever you'd want for breakfast, because you'd never choose the wrong thing," she explained further. There is so much wisdom passed on to children about what good choices are, in addition to those options generally being wholesome ones, that, she said, they learn how to make good choices.

Kids are given a lot of choice from the time they are young. But parents and teachers guide those choices and constantly explain to kids what a good choice is. In the day care where Mikaela worked, even very young toddlers are given choices of breads, meats, cheeses, and vegetables, and assemble their own sandwiches. "In general, we ask the kids a lot of questions about what they would like before they can even talk," she explained to me. The teachers put the food out on the table, and then ask the children, "Would you like this bread, or that kind? Would you like butter on it? Would you like to have ham, or cheese, and cucumber?" A child who can't speak can point to what he wants. Choice and self-responsibility—*within a boundary of what are good choices*—underlie everything. They want kids to feel empowered so there isn't coaxing, or judging, or labeling of the child's choice as good or bad. They ask a lot of questions of the children because they want the kids to learn how to ask these questions of themselves eventually: What would I like to eat

right now; what would be good for my body? Mikaela enthused, "I think this is a great way for children to learn how to make simple decisions early on and also be patient and calm around the table."

Teaching toddlers how to sit properly at a table is important. Kids don't start eating until everyone is seated, and are encouraged to stay at the table until everyone is done eating. "We generally try to make a routine of sitting down and having a nice time around the table even when very young," she explained.

We know that here, if you told children they could have anything they wanted for breakfast, you might risk their going out of control and choosing something like a Pop-Tart, or ice cream. But Mikaela told me that in Sweden, no one she knew would dream of having something like that for breakfast (and their family probably wouldn't have food like Pop-Tarts in the house in the first place), "because it's not what you do." You give children freedom of choice, knowing that they are regulating themselves through their knowledge about what really are good choices, and through the feeling of autonomy that comes from knowing their choices have always been genuinely respected—not watched over or monitored. You can trust a child's wisdom if you know he has internalized commonsense wisdom, such as what makes a healthy breakfast.

Mikaela cooks nearly every day together with her family. They always have a long, leisurely meal. Her family eats out rarely, as seldom as twice a year. Health is important, but moderation and pleasure are too. One of her favorite traditions as a child was getting pocket change for *lördagsgodis*, or "Saturday candy." In Sweden, it's long been a tradition for children to go to buy candy at the store on Saturday mornings. Candy stores are bursting with colorful and appealing choices: Swedish fish, chocolates, licorices, sour candies. Kids enjoy their candy later in the day while watching TV with their family. This was a cozy family memory for Mikaela. Because kids look forward to *lördagsgodis* every week, Mikaela explained, they don't hoard or sneak sweets during the week. In fact, Swedish children don't generally eat candy during the week. "You'd never think of having candy on a Wednesday!" she told me with a laugh.

SOUTH KOREA: VEGETABLES IN ABUNDANCE

South Koreans tie with Japanese in having the lowest obesity rates in the world (at 4 percent). In South Korea, eating is a family event just as it is in Japan and Sweden. South Koreans take great pride in creating homemade side dishes and enjoying them with friends and family, cooking every meal from scratch, and using beautiful serving ware to show colorful Korean cuisine at its best. My parents grow their own vegetables, including Korean peppers and gourds, keep a collection of extra-sharp knives on hand in the kitchen, and when we grew up, there were often potluck gatherings with other Korean immigrant families who lived nearby to share homemade dishes, porridges, or sautés.

Korean tables are laden with dishes such as acorn jelly, barbecued beef, rice-cake soups, kimchi stews, and multiple tiny dishes of Buddhist-style mountain vegetables, followed by fruit, honey cakes, cinnamon tea, and bean cakes for dessert. Korean food is dizzyingly diverse and plentiful. It is distinctive for the variety of vegetables (fresh, pickled, or fermented) that accompany every meal.

Like most Korean children, Chaewon, a six-year-old from Seoul, has a notably healthy diet and active lifestyle. And like most Korean children I know, she loves to eat.

Her mother, Jinah, breast-fed Chaewon exclusively until she was six months old. Then Jinah started Chaewon on solid foods she made herself. "I fed her rice porridge—either with beef and broccoli, or with pumpkin, carrot, spinach, and shrimp," Jinah recalled. Jinah put a lot of different little things in Chaewon's porridge, because she wanted to get Chaewon started on recognizing different tastes by eating a variety of different things.

It must have worked. Now, at six years old, Chaewon's favorite dishes are broiled mackerel, bean-paste soup, bean sprouts, sautéed sesame leaves (a pungent-tasting leaf that is often used as a side dish or to

make rice wraps), instant pickles made of chives, sautéed eggplants in soy sauce, little stir-fried anchovies, radish kimchi (spicy pickled radish, usually cut in cubes), and vegetable wraps (usually a big, plain piece of lettuce wrapped around rice and meat or fish, along with various pickles and condiments). In the winter, Chaewon likes to eat cabbage-wrapped pork. She doesn't complain about food, or whine about something she doesn't like. She's the rule, not the exception. There are so many kids like Chaewon that whenever I'm in South Korea I feel like I'm in a country of little gourmands.

Korean food is packed with flavor—especially the flavors of garlic, red pepper, and soy sauce and sesame oil. It's also very spicy. Like most Korean mothers, Jinah started her daughter on kimchi, the fiery Korean pickled cabbage, by first washing it in a bit of water. Some of the spice remains, just enough to get a toddler used to spicy food. This is how I learned to eat kimchi, and how our kids did too.

Snacks are simple. They might consist of an ear of corn or a roasted sweet potato. When we were young, my mother told my brothers and me that she walked to school with a hot potato in her pocket to keep her warm and, later on, enjoy as a snack. She told us this as she cooked her favorite childhood treats for us, or later for our children: plain broiled rice cakes dipped in soy sauce, or boiled potatoes mashed with butter and milk.

The most important principle of eating in Korea is to eat together as a family whenever possible, with everyone eating the same dishes, family style: a Korean dinner table is beautiful, with lots of small dishes, each filled with its own food, covering the table. My parents emphasized the importance of sitting down together at the table—even if my father got home too late from work to eat dinner with the rest of us, my mother tried to make sure we sat with him to keep him company. In Chaewon's family, dinner takes about an hour as they sit down and enjoy the food together. Most of the time, they have meat or a broiled fish or shrimp, at least eight different vegetable side dishes, and vegetable wraps along with rice and soup. After dinner, it's a Korean tradition to eat an abundant platter of fruit: Korean melon (a yellow melon with white flesh that has

a mild flavor similar to a pear); watermelon in the summer; crisp apples, Asian pears, and persimmons in the fall.

Korean food is daunting to cook because of all the fresh ingredients and multiple side dishes. Although we love to eat Korean food (and I love to cook it), I rarely have the time to make a full-course meal on my own. This is where community comes into play. In Korea, where the cultural norm is to live near or with extended family, it's often the case someone can help cook a good meal, and relatives and friends will often make extra side dishes to trade with each other. If not, families do what they can to make sure they get a nourishing meal. (These days, I'm told, busy urban families who are far from relatives turn to home chef services offering regular deliveries of nutritious, home-cooked meals.) Whenever I visit my parents, a family friend will invariably drop by with a dish—sautéed seaweed salad, pumpkin porridge filled with rice dumplings, or a roasted salmon—especially made to welcome us and to help my parents feed us. For Koreans, food is an expression of love and care.

FRANCE AND ITALY: TEACHING CHILDREN THAT FOOD IS SOMETHING TO ENJOY

The French, like the Japanese, take teaching children to enjoy food very seriously. "French parents believe that teaching your child to eat is as important as teaching them to read," Karen Le Billon, author of *French Kids Eat Everything*, explains.

Just as in Japan and other countries with traditional food cultures, there are specific times when French children eat, and the society as a whole frowns on random snacking. This French social stigma is so strong that snacking not only is privately discouraged—it's publicly warned against. TV snack ads appear with a banner that states, "For your health, avoid snacking between meals"—similar to warnings on cigarette cartons. Like me, Karen was a bit unmoored when she first moved abroad with her young children, who were two and four years old. "We had a

much more permissive approach before moving to France, and the kids snacked more frequently," Karen explained. But her family soon came to appreciate how children aren't allowed to eat at any time and any place between meals, and even how the idea of giving kids personal choice over food is unheard of. Intriguingly, this structured approach to food actually enabled parents and children to avoid the power struggles and negotiations so common in our culture. "Kids don't get a choice about what to eat. But parents are not coercive," Karen continued. "Food is fun, and tasty, and a great source of pleasure." By teaching children to enjoy food, French parents teach them how to enjoy one of life's greatest pleasures. "The French believe that learning to eat is a form of citizenship training," she says. "It's about socializing, learning to share, and learning about national culture through food."

A parent's job of encouraging children to eat widely is much easier when you live in a country where eating a variety of foods is highly valued and there is ample time to share meals with others. The French workday accommodates leisurely meals: many stores shut for several hours at lunchtime, again around seven in the evening, and 90 percent of French kids eat together with their families at home. This is a country where, as one mom I know who raised her two daughters in France emphatically told me, "We *educate* our children about how to eat."

The way food is introduced to children in France helps shape their impressive palates. One study shows that French parents introduce their children to vegetables, for instance, in a strikingly different way than is recommended here. American parents are urged to space vegetables—or any new food we introduce—carefully apart (the "four-day rule") so we can spot signs of a food allergy. French parents routinely offer a greater variety of vegetables—typically six during the first month of weaning—and rotate them more frequently. Some mothers in the study made as many as twenty-seven changes in the vegetables they gave from day to day during the twenty-eight-day study. Their primary motivation in choosing their feeding strategies was *taste development*—not food allergies. This approach helps develop a mindset about food that everyone,

from little children to adults, learns to hold dear: enjoying a very wide variety of delicious food is normal and expected.

Buttery *pain au chocolat* and a big bowl of café au lait for breakfast; steak au poivre with a side salad of white asparagus for lunch; cassoulet (a hearty meat and bean stew made with duck fat and pork sausage) for dinner. Americans don't think of French cooking—high as it is in butter, fat, meat, and white bread—as particularly healthy. But the French are slimmer and healthier than Americans. Despite their high-fat diet, they eat much smaller portions, pride themselves on moderation, and actually have lower rates of mortality from heart disease, greater longevity, and much lower obesity rates than do people in the United States. Since food is thought of as pleasurable, not guilt-inducing, individual foods aren't demonized. Learning to make choices in moderation is encouraged: although random grazing and snacking isn't condoned, individual foods or ingredients aren't treated as "bad." Karen told me, "They learn to treat treats as treats."

In France, social supports help provide nutritious school lunches to every child. When gourmet school lunches and food education are a mandatory part of school for everyone, learning how to partake in one of life's great pleasures isn't restricted to children of the elite, wealthy, or well educated. Freshly prepared three-course hot lunches are provided for six million children in the public school system, at a cost similar to our own, with subsidies for families who need financial support. In France, as in many other countries, the prevailing belief is that every child has the right to a high-quality, nutritious, and delicious lunch, and the quality of this lunch is the same for all (not the case in our own country, where income level often determines the quality of school lunch in a given location).

School lunch in France is a class in itself. Children get one and a half to two hours to eat a leisurely, three-course lunch, followed by recess. A typical menu for preschoolers in Versailles has children eating sliced radish and corn salad with vinaigrette dressing and black olive garnish, roasted guinea fowl, sautéed Provençal vegetables and wheat

berries, Saint-Paulin cheese, vanilla flan, and wafers. The partnership between family and school means everyone is helping children hone the art of eating. Karen shared this quote from the website of a school near Paris:

> Mealtime is a particularly important moment in a child's day. Our responsibility is to provide children with healthy, balanced meals; to develop their sense of taste; to help children, complementing what they learn at home, to make good food choices without being influenced by trends, media, and marketing; and to teach them the relationship between eating habits and health. But above all else, we aim to enable children to spend joyful, convivial moments together, to learn a "savoir-vivre," to make time for communication, social exchange, and learning about society's rules—so that they can socialize and cultivate friendships.

The approach in Italian schools is similar. Jen, a Canadian mom of two, lived in Italy for several years when her children were younger. She vividly remembers how lunch was cooked on the premises every day at her children's Italian public school in a small town near Florence. She credits that experience with helping her children learn to eat well. "This school had no money for anything, but they had a cook, a kitchen, often a garden, and the kids got to pick the vegetables and bring them in," Jen recalled as we sat drinking coffee in a café in Cambridge, Massachusetts (her family lives in the United States now). "Sometimes they made minestrone with the cook. My son learned to eat real food there—cooked carrots, cooked peas, spinach, every day, made right there in the kitchen."

I asked Jen about children's meals, and she laughed at the idea that children would eat different foods than adults. "Kids have the opportunity to eat real food every day, with real flavors," she said. It's different in the United States, where she feels parents are trying too hard to meet children's needs—dietary and otherwise. "It's not their fault—we're being told we have to do all these complex things to provide for our kids,

but don't realize how simple it can be," Jen continued. As she mulled over the fact that she never heard the term "picky eating" in Italy, she added, "I think that here, *kids learn to be suspicious of real food.*"

Jeannie Marshall, author of *The Simple Art of Feeding Kids: What Italy Taught Me About Why Children Need Real Food*, argues that when we raise kids to think of food as pleasure, we shape children's eating habits for better. "In Canada and the U.S., everyone has their own particular eating style (vegetarian, vegan, low-carb, gluten intolerant, lactose intolerant, organic only, raw food . . .)," Marshall explained to me in an e-mail exchange. "Even if some of these styles are actually healthy, they're still a form of picky eating." The individualized diets also can be a barrier to the shared experience of eating and enjoying food together, she pointed out.

On the other hand, shared eating experiences can be a great influence on our kids—when they see other adults and children enjoying food with gusto, eating widely and well seems normal. Marshall told me about a trip their family took to the beach with several Italian families, when her son Nico was four. They booked a big table at a beachside restaurant. One of the adults looked over the menu, quickly consulted with the others at the table, and then started ordering seafood antipasto, octopus salad, grilled calamari, little whole sardines that had been flash-fried in olive oil and then given a squirt of lemon, anchovies fried in an egg and flour batter, mussels, spaghetti with clams, and more. Everyone oohed and aahed over the food when it came to the table. The children helped themselves eagerly too. "I was so surprised to see Nico picking up sardines by the tail and then popping them into his mouth," Marshall remembered. "This is a culture of non-picky eaters."

LESSONS FROM HOME

Despite a global rise in obesity, countries like Japan, South Korea, Italy, France, and Sweden continue to draw on cultural traditions that promote eating a variety of fresh whole foods, cooking from scratch with

seasonal ingredients, and taking the time to enjoy eating together—both at school and at home. Parents in these countries, whose children enjoy better health outcomes and far lower obesity rates (with the exception of Italy) than in the United States, rely on age-old wisdom and cultural habits that have worked well for generations, rather than paying attention to ever-changing fad diets, aggressive marketing by food manufacturers, and nutritional "experts," which is what we tend to do in America.

But good eating can't be left up only to parents. Schools play a big part in fostering healthy eating choices and healthy eating habits. In Korea, a child at school would be served spicy chicken, noodles, soup, seasoned vegetables, and a persimmon; in Japan, perhaps a summer noodle salad in sesame dressing, cabbage and tofu soup, pickled vegetables, and a plum for dessert. Although First Lady Michelle Obama has been using her public role to promote healthy eating and nutritious foods in America's schools, for most kids in America, school lunch actually *undermines* healthy eating habits and reinforces poor diets.

Together with the First Lady, school lunch reformers across the country are working to improve the food we serve our children. At Fletcher-Maynard Academy, a public elementary school in East Cambridge, one-third of the small recess yard is taken up by a garden. In one corner is a native woodland area, decorated with small rocks painted by the children. Another section has gigantic planters where Japanese eggplant and sweet potatoes are growing. Raised beds hold tangles of bean, berry, tomato, corn, and squash plants. The children are cultivating peanuts, millet, grapes, and giant sunflowers as well. Just outside the school cars whiz by, hardly noticeable in the quiet of the garden.

Cambridge is one of the first cities in the nation to successfully turn back obesity. Almost ten years ago, after noticing that kids were increasingly overweight and unfit, a team from the Cambridge Public Health Department, the Institute for Community Health, and the Cambridge Public Schools began analyzing weight and fitness levels of K–8 students and reporting the results to families. The numbers were so alarming that

they received federal funding to begin a multipronged attack on the obesity epidemic, strategically involving children in school gardening as well as providing them with more fruits and vegetables every day, healthier school lunches, and increased physical fitness opportunities.

On the day I visited the school, Alice Gugelmann of CitySprouts, a Cambridge nonprofit bringing sustainable school gardens to Cambridge public schools, was showing a group of excited, bouncy first-graders a corn plant and asking them what continent it originally came from. They took turns pulling the hard kernels off the cob. Then they lined up one by one to mill the corn. It came out in soft, downy flakes. Some of the children asked to taste it raw, and they walked away with it cupped in their hands. Their teacher passed chives out to each child—which some ate raw (the kids grew fond of chives as they watched them growing), and some waited for the polenta they were making with Alice's help, which was bubbling away in a pot on a little burner, to be passed out to each of them on a Popsicle stick. When the polenta was cooked, the children sat on a stone wall, swinging their legs and savoring their Popsicle sticks of polenta.

The first-grade teacher told me that improvements in school food—the school district has a multiyear grant to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to all the kids for snack and lunch—were even more effective because they were introduced to the kids along with the hands-on experiences they were having in the garden. This is a "very powerful combination," she said. "Their preferences have changed." Thanks to Cambridge's integrated program, rather than having no idea where their fruits and vegetables came from, the kids now recognize what they're eating in the cafeteria.

Researchers who have followed elementary and middle school students have found that parents of students in highly developed school food programs are more likely to say that school has changed their children's knowledge about healthy food choices, their preferences, and their eating habits. Children who have an opportunity to garden and talk about food are more likely to prefer fruits and vegetables, particularly

green leafy vegetables, and eat nearly one and a half servings more of produce. The key component seems to be the combination of gardening integrated into the classroom.

Josefine Wendel and Dawn Olcott, nutritionists with the Cambridge Public Health Department who work with the School Food Service program, argue that Cambridge schools have achieved many of their goals—and impressive results—through a multifaceted and, most important, *slow* approach to change.

One of their most effective strategies was to use taste tests to introduce new foods to children, especially fruits and vegetables. Presentation was key. The taste tests were presented as a privilege—something fun to look forward to. Even so, the team was surprised by how much the students *loved* lightly steamed fresh broccoli. "Kids liked the crunchiness, the bright green color, and that it wasn't overcooked," said Olcott, noting that broccoli is still a popular menu item six years later. They also used what marketers and behavioral economists call "choice theory" to help children make sound decisions and choices in the face of temptation. To level the playing field, they tell me, those of us who present food to kids must be the marketers for healthy eating.

Research shows that paying attention to how food is presented to children can affect their choice of what to buy and eat. Seventy percent more kids will eat fruit if someone merely suggests they do, and putting the fruit in a fruit bowl rather than on a stainless steel tray more than doubles fruit sales. Broccoli at the beginning of the line encourages children to choose it, while, interestingly, putting a salad bar in front of the cash register nearly triples sales of salad. Placing low-fat milk in the front of the cases and chocolate milk in the back makes a difference. Feeling in control is important to our kids: giving them a choice between carrots and celery is more effective at getting them to eat the vegetables than making them take only carrots. Giving children choices, while also making sure those choices are positioned in such a way as to encourage healthy eating, works. As a result, Cambridge kids are beating back obesity and living healthier lives.

. . .

Some might argue that the culture of eating in Japan is too regimented (the lengths to which some adults go to convince a child to clear his plate absolutely aren't for me) and France is too intolerant (try ordering vegetarian in a French restaurant and you'll see what I mean). Besides, our American lives are too busy for the long sit-down lunches of other cultures; it's difficult to find fresh ingredients because our homes are not within walking distance of little markets that make it easy for parents in other countries to pick up small amounts of fresh ingredients to cook an appealing evening supper; and it's discouraging to go to all that effort to feed children with limited palates. These are valid arguments that I understand well. Raising kids is exhausting, and treating food as more than just fuel to get kids through the day can feel like an added unnecessary burden. Even though I love to cook, I often find myself feeling tired and wondering what to make for dinner at the end of a long day.

But the world of pleasurable, healthy eating is attainable for our children and for ourselves. Once you get into the habit of eating well, you realize that it's really not harder than eating poorly. It's just as fast to rinse off a cucumber, peel a banana, or wash a handful of spinach as it is to open a bag of chips. Strategies like cooking earlier, batch cooking on weekends, or exchanging meals with friends can save time. A family meal can be twenty minutes, but those twenty minutes are important because they're spent together.

The idea that our children are picky eaters might just be a cultural norm and a marketing strategy that doesn't have to bind us. It's possible for us teach our children to eat well. As a friend told me, we wouldn't offer our child just one kind of book if we wanted him to become an avid reader: we can learn how to do the same with food.

Our family is hardly the paragon of perfect eating—but now I've seen that isn't what really matters: a balanced approach is what helps best to foster a healthy relationship with food, for ourselves and for

our children. Food is more than fuel; it's meant to be enjoyed and appreciated as a holistic experience. We can help our kids learn how to eat well just as we'd teach them any other life skill, so that they can share in the wider world alongside us, and enjoy all that food has to offer.

PART 2

The Raising of Children