

RAISING KIDS

# How a Trip to the Zoo Inspired My Kids to Eat Less Meat

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43

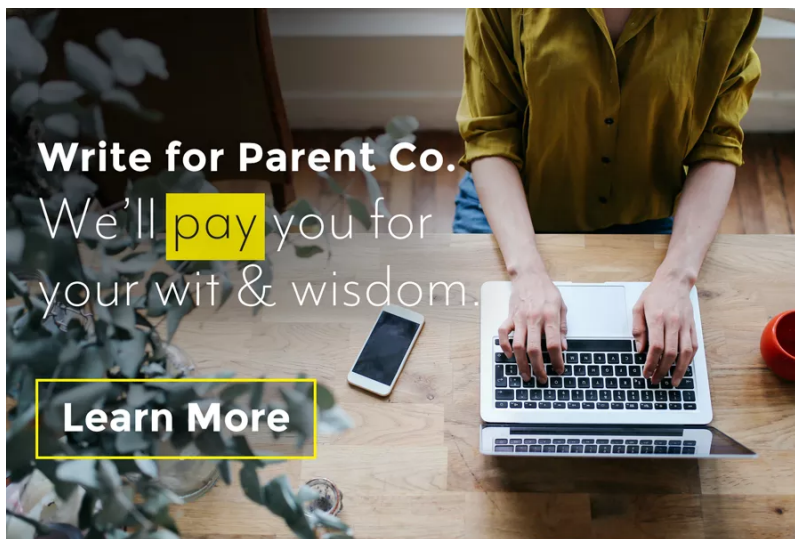


“Mommy, look at how adorable those chickens are,” my daughter mentioned during our recent trip to the Oregon Zoo.

I responded, “Yes, they really are cute. It’s kind of sad how we eat them.”

Well, my casual off-the-cuff comment struck a chord with my children. A couple of hours later during lunch, they declared that they wanted to be vegetarians. It just didn’t feel right to them to eat animals any longer. They felt that if they kept eating them, there would be no more animals left.

I have to admit, I’m pretty proud of my five- and nine-year-old children for making the connection between the animals they thought were so cute in the zoo to what they decide to put in their bodies on a daily basis.



I'm not a vegetarian (although I tried for a few months in college), but I recently read a wonderful book called "[The Reducetarian Solution](#)" that presents a clever, innovative perspective on the food choices we make. Being a reducetarian offers an alternative solution, allowing people to simply reduce their meat intake as opposed to completely avoiding all meat for the rest of their lives (not such a simple task for everyone). It takes away the pressure and judgement of how much meat we eat. The book's contributors provide several creative options for reducing your meat intake, such as being a weekday vegetarian, a vegetarian before six pm, or only eating meat on special occasions.

The book and website are informative because they explain the huge impact eating less meat has for us and our planet. Large-scale meat production and consumption is responsible for creating a significant amount of global greenhouse emissions that cause climate change, which harmfully impacts our health and causes animals to suffer. When we choose to eat less meat (such as chicken, beef, and fish) we can start to have a pretty large impact. By not eating meat, each of us can save about 100 animals per year. We will also save money at the grocery store and on doctor's bills.

Studies show that eating less meat minimizes health problems like heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and strokes. Of course, these are issues that we need to address as we get older, but teaching our kids about eating less meat from a young age can help them make healthy choices for a lifetime.

In addition, diets low in animal products also help to reduce obesity, which is a huge problem for children in this country. According to the Centers for [Disease Control and Prevention](#), the percentage of children with obesity in the United States has more than tripled since the 1970s. Today, about one in five school-aged children (ages six to 19) is obese. However a new study published in the [Journal of the American College of Nutrition](#) has found that vegetarian diets are almost twice as effective in reducing body weight than a diet containing meat.

With all these benefits, I know that this is a great decision for my kids. Of course, as with any change, there are some challenges. My husband is the farthest thing from a vegetarian and is doubtful that our kids will stick with this decision for very long. He's concerned about them finding enough to eat, especially when we go out to restaurants. Unlike my husband and I, who have dairy allergies, our kids are fine with dairy and have plenty more options to eat than we do given that limitation. I'm a little concerned about them getting enough protein, so we are making sure to include lots of beans, nuts, eggs, and dairy in their diet.

On the other hand, a major positive of this change is how it has opened up my children's eyes to new, healthy food options that they would have never noticed before. In the past, they would have quickly chosen the chicken fingers, hamburgers, or hot dogs off the kids' menu. Now we work together as a family to read over all the options at a restaurant, and they are trying salads, stir fry meals, Asian noodles, veggie burgers, and burritos. We were out at a sushi restaurant last night and my son even tried tamago sushi, the egg omelet sushi flavored with soy sauce and mirin. It turns out that eating less meat is actually making my kids more adventurous in the food department!

So far this life change has not been too difficult for them. If you look closely enough, you can find plenty of vegetarian options in the supermarket and in restaurants. It's important for parents to be supportive of these types of decisions that our children make at any age, as long as they are not harmful to them.

I think it's actually easier for young children to make huge changes like this because they don't over analyze their decisions like adults do. My kids simply realized that they felt bad eating animals and wanted to stop doing it. My son said it makes him feel good in his heart that he is saving lots of animals. My daughter said she is really happy that she's not eating animals anymore because seeing the chicken in the farm at the zoo made her feel sad.

The best part of the reducetarian philosophy is that the decision they made does not have to become a stressor for them if they choose to eat meat occasionally. I've adopted a reducetarian approach in which I only eat meat at dinner time. I no longer eat meat for breakfast or lunch. However, I am giving myself some flexibility to swap a meal once in awhile for special occasions. For example, we may have a family brunch with lox and bagels that I don't want to pass up. During days like that, I will then eat a vegetarian dinner.

My son said that I'm being really supportive of his decision and that makes him want to continue to eat less meat. I explained that it is okay to eat meat sometimes if he chooses, and that I am proud of him either way. Both of my kids said they will probably eat meat only once a week. My son's choice would be a hamburger and my daughter's a hot dog.

I want my kids to be confident in themselves and comfortable to make their own decisions. I will be especially careful not to judge or question their decision over time as it may possibly fluctuate and morph. The best part of all is that my own children are serving as a positive influence on me to be more in tune with my own dietary decisions as I feel encouraged to eat less meat right along beside them.

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