

Why We Don't Eat Animals

Bringing Up Vegetarian Children

Paper presented at 39th IVU World Vegetarian Congress

3rd October 2010 - Jakarta, Indonesia

Halimah Ilavarasi, Creative Director, VegVibe magazine, Singapore

The logo for VegVibe, featuring the word "VegVibe" in a bold, green, sans-serif font. The "V" in "Vibe" is significantly larger and more prominent than the other letters.

VegVibe is the first print magazine in Singapore that discusses vegetarianism, veganism, health & nutrition, animal welfare, and environmentalism without using an in-your-face approach or religious slant. VegVibe presents the facts logically and allows readers to decide for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions, facilitating self-reflection and, consequently, more committed decisions. In addition VegVibe acts as a platform that unites groups across animal welfare, environmental and vegetarian/vegan movements.

Most of you will agree with me when I say parenting is not the easiest job in the world. Just by talking to several of our friends with children is enough to tell me about the joys and pains of parenthood. From the moment a baby is born, parents have to worry constantly worry about the health and holistic development of the child every step of the way. Added to that, parents, especially new parents, have to deal with well-meaning advice from friends and family on how best to bring up the child.

Add vegetarianism into the equation and parenting gets infinitely harder, especially if you come from a family of non-vegetarians and do not have the necessary support system or vegetarian culture at home and in the social circle. Every time the child falls ill or has to turn down an offer of meat product, comments might be made that the child is nutritionally deficient or deprived of proper food.

How many of you had to face such comments from friends or family? Our objective today is not to air our grievances but to discuss if what they say has any truth in it. So do these comments from friends and family hold water? In some instances, yes – bringing up vegetarian children, as with any, has several challenges. Today we will be examining some of the challenges faced by vegetarian parents and children - namely in the form of nutrition, social pressure and institutional pressures.

Nutrition

Quite essentially, vegetarianism and veganism greatly revolves around food choices and children need a well-balanced diet to give them the best start in life. While it is bad to bring up non-vegetarian children on junk food, it is equally bad to bring up vegetarian children on an

improperly planned diet. Indeed, there have been several instances of children suffering malnutrition and growth defects because of vegetarian parents not taking the necessary steps to plan an effective diet for their children.

As you can see from newspaper reports it appears to be that children on a vegan diet suffer from malnutrition. The media is often quick to pick up on malnutrition among vegetarian and especially vegan children. In some cases, there are grounds for such media attention as can be seen in these cases when vegan parents did not educate themselves sufficiently on the needs of a child's nutrition but instead continued to feed it food that was not suitable, ultimately causing the child's death.

However, research indicates that on a well-balanced diet vegetarian children's growth is comparable to that of non-vegetarian children. The *Farm Study*¹, conducted between 1971 and 1989 studied the growth patterns of vegetarian and vegan children and found that their growth was within the 25th to 75th percentile and they were only marginally slimmer than their non-vegetarian counterpart.

Another study conducted exclusively on vegan children in Britain in 1988 also found that vegan children's health and development is comparable to that of non-vegetarian children. However, the study suggested that parents of vegan children have to be mindful of providing sufficient minerals like iron, calcium and vitamins like B12 to ensure optimal growth.

How about the Asian context? A study conducted in 2000 researching Chinese vegetarian children in Hong Kong found that they had comparable iron and calcium count and had a

¹ <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/cgi/reprint/82/3/450.pdf>

healthier diet with lower fat, more fibre and polyunsaturated fatty acids as compared to omnivorous children.

Hence, research shows that a vegetarian diet is balanced and indeed suitable for children. So how do we go about ensuring that vegetarian, especially vegan children grow up healthy? Firstly, parents must ensure that children attain their nutritional goals at every stage of development. The period from birth to the first year is a critical period for physical growth and brain development. For infants, mothers should consider breastfeeding up to the age of six months and preferably up to one year old or longer. Vegan or otherwise, the mother's milk provides the right composition of fatty acids, proteins and carbohydrates needed for a baby's development. Some nutritionists suggest giving newborns a shot of Vitamin B12 and Vitamin K and a shot of iron at about six months to help in providing sufficient nutrition.

Another area that vegetarian and vegan parents have to be mindful is in providing sufficient DHA, an essential fatty acid for infants. DHA is necessary for the development of psychomotor skills, brain functioning and visual acuity. However, DHA is mainly found in fish and eggs and a vegetarian diet is often low in DHA and a typical vegan diet hardly contains any DHA. Hence, pregnant women and lactating mothers have to increase consumption of DHA producing food like flaxseeds and canola oil or better yet, consume vegan DHA supplements which are derived from algae.

As the infant grows, vegetarian parents can start adding semi-solid food and wean them of the mothers' milk. Here on, they have to ensure that children receive sufficient minerals and vitamins such as iron, calcium, B12 and zinc. In fact, parents have to be mindful that young children tend to become full quickly since a vegetarian and vegan diet is high in fibre and takes longer to

digest. However, this might mean that they are not receiving the required amount of calories, proteins and essential minerals.

Vegetarian parents should consider introducing iron and calcium fortified and food to children as well as provide nutrient and calorie dense foods such as mashed avocado and bananas, firm tofu, nut and bean spreads and olive oil. As children grow their activity level increases significantly, and they burn calories and energy very quickly. Hence, it is not advisable to limit fat intake until after the age of two. Also, parents have to be careful about introducing nuts to young toddlers as it can pose as a choking hazard. Furthermore, parents with family history of nut allergies should introduce nuts after the age of three.

Hence, adequate research with proper meal planning is essential to bring up healthy vegan and vegetarian children. I also want to make a pertinent point at this juncture. Parents should not feel ashamed or uncomfortable about supplementing children's diet with vitamin pills or fortified food. A vegetarian and vegan diet can provide the needed trace minerals and nutrients needed but because we live in the urban context, some of these minerals are not available abundantly. For example Vitamin B12 is a bacterium that is naturally occurring in plants, animals and groundwater, but because we live in an urban society, we consume food that is processed and treated taking away the bioavailability of trace minerals. Hence if necessary find good quality vegetarian supplements to provide sufficient nutrition for your children.

Social Pressures

So now you have planned the perfect diet and meal plan for your child, is that all there is to bringing up vegetarian children? Not quite. Meal planning is just one step in bringing up healthy and well adjusted vegetarian children.

Being part of a society entails being subjected to certain expected social norms and behaviours. Though there is increasingly more exposure and awareness about the benefits of vegetarian and vegan diet, if you come from a family of non-vegetarians or even being the only vegan in a vegetarian family can pose a host of problems and challenges. Anecdotal evidence suggests that often vegetarian and especially vegan parents face interference from family and friends who do not agree with the choice of bringing up children as vegetarians.

An area of contention that vegetarian and vegan parents might encounter is the health of the child argument. When the child falls ill or looks less than chubby, usually the argument will be that the child is malnourished and hence skinny or due to a lack of nutrition the child is falling ill. Another alternative argument in the same vein will be that a vegetarian diet is risky and dangerous and hence it is irresponsible to bring up veg children. You might be surprised to know that such ideas are also shared by learned people as well. For example, Kathryn Paxton George, a professor of philosophy, argues that to not include meat products in the diet of children is akin to depriving the child of blood transfusion. She believes that parents are obligated to include meat and animal products in children's diets.

This argument makes sense if a vegetarian diet is incomplete. But, as we have seen, a well planned and balanced diet provides the necessary nutrition. Given this situation, and depending

on how receptive the family member or friends are, you can consider using the following strategies: Firstly, you can cite the studies and research, like those that I have shared with you, to show that veg children grow up healthy, intelligent and well adjusted. Secondly you can also raise the example of historically vegetarian communities like the Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains who follow various forms of vegetarianism and in some instances veganism for over centuries and have intelligent and healthy descendents to prove for it.

Thirdly, you can try explaining to them that as children grow from infants to toddlers, they will naturally appear thinner as they are experiencing growth spurts and with the increased activity level, they will be leaner. At the same time, a chubby child is not a sign of vitality and research is even starting to show that chubby babies have a higher chance of ending up as overweight teenagers. Furthermore, vegan and vegetarian diets are lower in saturated fats and hence children will be leaner but nonetheless equally healthy.

In line with the argument about providing sufficient nutrition, well meaning friends and especially family members might consider a vegetarian diet as depriving the child of the best things in life. As the society develops and people have more disposable income, there is an increase in meat consumption which is otherwise too expensive. Hence, the traditional view is such that a plant based diet is for those who are unable to afford the better things in life and to prevent children from eating meat is depriving them of this luxury.

In addition, vegan parents tend to be scrutinised more as many confectionary items are not suitable for children as chocolates often contain dairy, ice-cream has milk and cream, cakes have dairy and eggs and some sweets and lollipops have milk or gelatine added in it. Most fast food joints would also be unsuitable but visits to fast food outlets have often been associated with part

of a 'normal childhood'. Moreover, turning down an offer of candies can be considered rude, especially when it is bought by a grandparent or a relative, who will also feel that the children are not allowed to enjoy their childhood.

Most of these arguments stem from caring about the child's well-being and enjoyment and hence, there are some strategies to consider. For those who feel that depriving children of meat is unfair, the question then becomes the potentially disastrous state of the meat and its related industry. In April 2010, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducted an audit² of the American meat industry and admitted to finding veterinary drugs, pesticides and heavy metals such as copper in the meat that are sold to consumer as there are no guidelines in place to stop the sale to consumers. What more, the USDA said that no amount of cooking will destroy these dangerous residues from the meat.

However, the problem is not only limited to the US. Asia, as well has been faced with several food related disasters, most infamously the milk scandal that was tainted with melamine and affected all nations, including Singapore, who imported milk from China. The problem was not only limited to milk but to all other food products made with the tainted milk, like ice-creams, candies and chocolates. As recent as 2009, luncheon meat from China was also found to be tainted with a banned chemical which made 70 people ill. Not eating meat or consuming dairy seems more in the interest of the child's well-being than otherwise. With the increasing number of tainted meats and diseased animals making its way to our table, isn't it better to so-call 'depriving the child' and protect them from potential harm and risk?

² <http://www.usda.gov/oig/webdocs/24601-08-KC.pdf>

Another point to raise is that feeding children fast-food and confectionaries are generally not healthy. A lot of fast-food and confectionaries are highly processed with refined sugar, preservatives food additives and food dyes. Research is starting to show that children consuming junk food have a higher chance of ending up with behavioural problems like hyperactivity or physical problems like obesity or childhood diabetes. Limiting or preventing children from consuming candies and junk food is not a bad idea at all. However, instead of preventing family members from giving sweets and candies, advise them to provide dried fruit snacks, and where to get vegan and vegetarian alternatives, some of which may be processed with healthier ingredients as well.

In relation to depriving children of what is supposedly entitled to them is another argument that arises from omnivorous friends and family would be that of giving the choice to the child. Often they would suggest that going vegetarian was a personal choice by the parent and these beliefs should not be forced upon the child. Instead they would urge the parent to bring up the child on an omnivorous diet and let the children decide for themselves when they are old enough to consider the facts.

However, what most of them forget is that parents decide on all aspects of the child's life from the time the baby is born. From the type of clothes, medication, language, education, religious practices and diet, parents make choices all the time for the children. If it is wrong to bring up a child on a vegetarian diet, it is also wrong to bring up the child on an omnivorous diet as we are still making the choice for the child and their consensus have not been sought until they are able to communicate their wishes at a much older age.

Secondly, vegetarian parents can also raise the idea that choice is subjective. For example, certain religions prohibit consumption of certain food, like Muslims don't consume pork or alcohol and Hindus do not consume beef. Once the baby is born, this decision is made for him and he is not given the choice as to whether he wants to follow this diet. However, this allowance or understanding is often not given to people who firmly believe that veganism or vegetarianism is the best choice for their children.

Institutional Pressures

Apart from social pressures, there are often several institutional pressures that parents have to be concerned about. One such institution is the school. Finding the right school and teachers makes a lot of difference to the well-being and emotional adjustment of the child. Depending on how lucky vegetarian parents are, they might be able to find a vegetarian preschool or a secondary school that is receptive to vegetarianism. Even in the Singapore context, not all schools have dedicated vegetarian stalls and only in some instances would you be able to find veg-friendly food in schools without dedicated vegetarian stalls. If children do not have access to vegetarian friendly schools parents can consider a few options.

Firstly, it is important to develop cordial relationship with the school administrators and teachers. Instead of insisting on vegetarian food to be readily available, parents can consider sharing literature on the benefits of vegetarianism - such as better health, healthy eating habits at a young age - to encourage schools to either have a dedicated vegetarian stall or at the least provide a vegetarian option. In the case of Singapore, we have the *Healthy Eating in Schools Programme*³ and while it is not about vegetarianism, it will be easier to ask for vegetarian options as it aligns

³ <http://www.hpb.gov.sg/foodforhealth/article.aspx?id=2818>

with this initiative. In your children's school as well, find out if there are initiatives in place as it will make it easier to ask for vegetarian food.

One of the reasons why some schools don't offer vegetarian food or force caterers to provide vegetarian food is the lack in interest among pupils. This lack in demand would mean that it is not lucrative for stallholders or caterers to provide vegetarian options. Again, to work around this, try to rope in more parents who share similar philosophy with you to encourage their children to eat more vegetarian dishes or work with the school to promote healthier food, which is vegetarian-friendly food, to make it worthwhile for stallholders to provide vegetarian food. Of course, this is a harder challenge to tackle, but marketing vegetarian food as trendy helps in creating interest for children. Also, providing interesting vegetarian food from different cultures will help to create more demand for vegetarian food. For example in Singapore, the Vegetarian Society of Singapore worked with a local school to come up with vegetarian burgers to be served during meal times. This initiative was well received by non-vegetarian students.

In relation to school, another institutional pressure that often comes about is the curriculum. Innocently, school textbooks can talk positively about non-vegetarian or non-vegan activities like fishing, farming animals or animals kept in captivity. In relation to the curriculum teachers might organise activities like cooking and trying non-vegetarian food or doing craft work with animal-derived products like wool, leather, feathers and such. For instance, one vegan parent shared about how her young vegan son came back home in tears because the school teacher had given him some homework based on a story of a grandfather and granddaughter bonding over a fishing trip. Despite explaining to the teacher that the boy was upset about the fishing aspect of the story

and was willing to do another project, the teacher could not accept it and instead told the mother that they had to be respectful of other people's culture and that the story was not real.

This is an institutional pressure that is quite hard to tackle as curriculum is often prescribed from the Education Ministry and it will be hard to modify it to suit the vegetarian children's needs. However, what parents can do is to work closely with the school to find out in advance what is going to be taught and work out a vegetarian alternative for the child. For example, if the children are going to learn how to bake cookies, parents can provide the ingredients and recipe for vegetarian cookies so that the child does not feel left out. Also for craft work, with prior instructions, parents can easily source eco-friendly and vegan alternatives.

When it comes to the prescribed textbooks or school materials, there is limited choice for the parents. What they can instead do is to prepare their children ahead of the lesson by reading the story or text with them and explaining to them that these are some activities that people take part in but it is not necessarily the correct or right thing to do. This can actually become a teachable moment and help to reinforce vegetarian ideals and philosophy to the child. Discussions can also revolve around animal-friendly leisure activities that people can take part in like helping out at animal shelters. This task becomes easier as the child becomes older and has the ability to differentiate between reality and fiction and the boundaries between personal values and social norms.

Another institutional pressure that vegetarian parents might face is the healthcare institutions. Though there has been increasing awareness about vegetarianism and veganism, it is often not easy to find a gynaecologist or paediatrician who is receptive to a vegetarian diet. It is not to say that doctors are close minded, but more because they lack the knowledge and understanding of

what alternative food sources and substitutes are available and the long term benefits of such a diet. Instead they would recommend adding some animal products like milk or eggs at the least to receive sufficient nutrition.

Though it might appear frustrating, this challenge is relatively easy to overcome. For one, getting the doctor to run a health screening on the parents alone would be sufficient evidence to show that a vegan or vegetarian diet is healthy. Several vegan parents have cited convincing sceptical doctors with the results of their blood work which show that they are in the pink of health. This will put the doctor's scepticism to rest and sometimes they can even advise the doctor on a vegan diet. Another suggestion would be to find a doctor who is open to discuss a vegetarian diet alternative. This is best done through recommendations from friends. Then share information and resources on vegan and vegetarian diet with the doctor which will help expose him or her to alternative diet choices and perhaps make them more receptive to your diet choice.

Strategies to Cope

Apart from the suggestions made on tackling nutritional concerns, social pressure and institutional pressure, I would like to offer some general suggestions for both vegetarian parents and children.

Support Groups

Human beings are naturally social and having a support group is very useful for anyone who has decided to embrace a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. For vegetarian parents this would mean getting support in the form of knowledge and experience sharing and a listening ear when things

are not going as planned. Support groups are useful as they often organise meet ups and this will be an ideal place for vegetarian children to form friendships with one another as well as to share their own personal growing pains. Support groups are also excellent platforms to get recommendations for vegetarian friendly schools, doctors or even restaurants to bring the extended family to.

Holidays and Celebrations

Unless vegetarian and vegan parents have supportive extended families, holidays and celebrations can be an extremely difficult and frustrating time. When family members are not willing to provide vegetarian option, parents should ensure that the child has eaten a good meal before attending the event so as to not feel hungry as this can eventually be psychologically associated with deprivation. Also, if possible offer to bring along a dish to contribute so that there will be something for the parent and child to consume and experience family bonding especially during the holidays instead of feeling left out by the rest of the extended family. At the same time by bringing along a dish, vegetarian parents will also be introducing omnivorous family members to delicious yet healthy food in a non-threatening way.

Celebrations are not only limited to the home environment but when the child starts attending school, there will also be birthday parties and other sorts of school celebrations. In this case, if the vegetarian parents can get notification ahead, they can consider sending some confectionary for the child to consume so as to not feel left out. For example, if the birthday party entails some pizza and cupcakes, send along some vegetarian pizza slices and vegetarian cupcakes.

However, sometimes celebrations can occur spontaneously and vegetarian parents might not be able to provide the necessary food items in advance. In this case, the vegetarian child will feel left out and in some situations frustrated but parents can try to make up for it by treating the child after the event even though it is still not the same as partaking in the celebrations together. Alternatively, vegetarian parents can consider asking the teacher to keep a bag of non-perishable candies or confectionary that can be given to the vegetarian child while others are having their non-vegetarian food.

Disrespectful family members

In some extreme cases, vegetarian parents might encounter a situation where the family members have intentionally sneaked meat-derived products in the children's food or feed children meat when they are not around. This sometimes happens when vegetarian parents are working and need the assistance of the grandparents to help care for the child. Alternatively, on occasion parents' authority might be undermined when family members outwardly tell children it is acceptable to consume meat.

In situations such as this, it is important to remain calm. If the child has already eaten meat, there is nothing that the parent can do about it. However, it is extremely important that the parent voice their opposition to the person privately so as to not make the child feel guilty or arouse the curiosity of the child to try more of the taboo food. When such transgressions are knowingly committed, it is important to set firm boundaries and communicate the repercussions of such disrespectful behaviour such as denying access to the child. It is important for the vegetarian parents to assert themselves in this instance because it shows a lack of respect for the person as a parent and the choices they have made for their child.

Teaching Children to Handle Peer Pressure

Children can sometimes be teased for being on a vegetarian diet or feel left out by their peers when they dine out. Depending on the age group, a few strategies can be put in place to help cope with peer pressure.

Firstly, for younger children, parents can consider creating interesting lunchbox meals for them to bring to school for their lunch. Though this would mean that the vegetarian child stands out from his peers, it will be in a positive way, making him or her appear special or cool, helping to reinforce a positive outlook to vegetarianism and veganism. Vegetarian parents can also consider occasionally giving their children veggie hotdogs or veggie burgers to bring to school which again adds an element of interest and excitement to their meals.

Secondly, parents can teach older children how to order vegetarian food when dining out with their friends. For example, when dining out at restaurants, parents can give the children the opportunity to enquire about vegetarian food options and place orders themselves so that they can learn to be more independent and confident with their friends. Parents can also let children know which restaurants or fast food joints will be suitable to bring their friends to which will make it easier for them to fit into their social circle.

For older vegetarian children as well, provide a list of vegetarian snacks or candies that are easily available from the convenience store like 7-11. In this way, when their friends pop in to buy items or decide to hang out together, they will not feel left out or feel pressured to eat non-vegetarian items.

Most importantly, keep an open communication channel with vegetarian children. If they are not fortunate to have vegetarian playgroups or friends, they can sometimes feel lost and socially awkward. By talking to them and explaining to them from a young age why eating animals is not right they will be able to carry these values with them constantly. For example even young children understand when you tell them that you don't eat animals, because animals are our friends. At the same time, as the child grows older, be open to the fact that they might consume something non-vegetarian out of curiosity or just because they want to fit in. At that point, the choice should be left to them as the more vegetarian parents force them to remain vegetarian, the more likely they will rebel. Instead, keeping an open mind and creating a supportive and non-judgemental environment is necessary to let the children know that they can always become vegetarians again if they want to.

Why Raise Vegetarian Children?

Raising vegetarian children is definitely not an easy task in a non-vegan world. However, why should we raise children vegetarian despite these challenges?

- They grow up to have healthier eating habits and become healthier adults even if they don't stay vegetarian
- They have lesser chances of growing up to be overweight teenagers or develop diseases later in life, like cancer or heart disease
- At least one research study suggests that vegetarian children tend to be smarter
- Vegetarian children grow up with more empathy and social awareness
- Some experts believe vegetarians and vegans have longer life spans than meat eaters
- Vegetarian children are less likely to fall sick as they have better immune systems

Resources

Books

There are several fiction and non-fiction books out there that children can enjoy reading. There have been more story books coming into the market for children covering topics such as animal compassion, vegetarianism and dealing with peer pressure. There are also several non-fiction works providing guidebooks on going vegetarian for children and teenagers and even cookbooks for children.

There are also several books on bringing up vegetarian children for adults and for example *Dr Spock's Baby & Child Care*⁴ is an excellent book on children nutrition and dealing with social influences.

The Internet

The internet is perhaps the easiest and most free method of getting good information. Of course when it comes to the internet remember to read widely as not all advice come from experts. Several countries have their own vegetarian union websites which provide lots of tips and online forums for people to share their own experiences or ask questions.

Support Groups

As mentioned previously, support groups are very important in helping to raise vegetarian children. Parents can form playgroups, share recipes and also by physically meeting up, as

⁴ <http://www.amazon.com/Dr-Spocks-Baby-Childcare-Seventh/dp/0671537628>

compared to virtual forums, it will have the added advantage of parents picking up on other children's physical cues and dish out appropriate advice even without asking for help.

I would like to reiterate that vegetarian parenting has a lot to do with planning, having adequate research and also believing in yourself that you are doing the right thing. As the child grows, having an open mind and open communication will help in nurturing healthy and wholesome children.