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Problem Eaters Don't Need More Attention

by Jacob Azerrad, Ph.D.

Don't reward refusal

"Supper times are miserable." Andy's parents agreed. "He just won't eat, he claims not to like whatever is served, and then he sneaks snacks between meals or before bed. We've tried everything, giving him the things he asks for – and then won't eat – trying to persuade him, promising him treats if he will just finish the meal."

His father remarked that he thought Andy was trying to punish his mother for some reason by not eating what she prepared.

"The look on his face just seems to be saying he's getting even with us for something." We don't have any idea what we've done to make him feel this way. We've tried to talk to him about it, so we'll be able to understand him."

Seven-year-old Andy isn't about to help his parents understand, except that he has learned to behave in this way at mealtimes (and he is not starving, because he has his snacks to rely on).

What has he learned? Most likely – because of inadvertent encouragement from his parents, a father who makes an issue of "cleaning up your plate," a mother who equates enjoyment of food with happiness – that if he doesn't eat, he'll get a lot of attention from everyone around the table. That is all that Andy's parents have to understand.

He's not "trying to punish" his mother; he's trying to bring her closer by drawing all her attention to himself. By not eating. It isn't necessary to look further than the behavior itself and the consequences to understand what's going on and how to change it.

Andy's "problem" was solved not by understanding what was or wasn't going on in his mind, but by giving him new responses to his behavior and new ways of behaving.

First, Andy was allowed to eat only at mealtimes, no snacks available between meals or before bed. This gave him the choice of going hungry (unlikely) or eating with the rest of the family.

No special meals just for Andy. Meals were prepared according to the preferences of his mother and father.

When he refused to eat ("I don't like chicken," he said the first day, although chicken was generally something he asked to have made especially for him), nobody except his mother said anything. "That's the meal for tonight." Not one asked him to eat, or pleaded with him. The conversation went on around him and had nothing to do with his eating or failure to eat.

The first night was a hungry night for Andy. And it was a time without any attention.

The second night was a repetition of the first, except that he asked for his food a while after dinner. He got it cold: no reheating or special treatment.

After a couple of weeks, Andy's parents had all the understanding they needed. They had no more dinner table dramas with Andy at their center.

[Learn more about Dr. Azerrad](#)

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