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good living

# Just a minor problem

The struggle to make children eat healthily may seem endless but an author has some tips, writes **Jane Willson**.

**I**t's the question you don't want to hear: "Are your kids good eaters?" Er, not really. OK, no.

The messages are everywhere: diet is crucial; impart a love of food and the affair will last a lifetime; encourage kids to get their hands dirty in the vegetable garden and they'll beg for the green stuff, and never single out "healthy" food as though it's any less joyous than a bucket of hot, salty chips.

And then there's my dad's line: "Don't fuss, they'll never starve."

True, but parents' instinct to send their children to bed full is a tough one to fight. And it's troubling when you're constantly desperate to concoct a delicious, nutrition-packed dish that will bring them around.

Enter writer and cookbook author Amanda Grant, most recently consultant to *The Silver Spoon for Children*, a beautiful book catering to the burgeoning market of cooking with kids. Like most cookbooks these days, it's an impressive hardback, art-directed to within an inch of its life but with an emphasis on step-by-step illustrations and simple pictures of each dish. There are 40 "favourite Italian recipes" in what is the first children's edition of a book widely considered to be that country's food bible.

The "getting started" tips include handling knives and cracking eggs and the recipes are mostly fun, with lots of usual suspects including pizza, pasta and lasagne. (Though I still struggle with the perfect bechamel and the seven-year-old lost interest when the constant stirring became too much like hard work.)

There are also recipes with a twist, such as beans with sausages, one of Grant's daughter's favourites. The original recipe calls for wine but she improvised with apple juice.

I decide to share my sad secret with Grant, a Britain-based nutritionist, healthy eating advocate and mother of three. Her children are 10, eight and six. "They've all gone through the difficult times," she says,

possibly trying to gauge whether I'm referring to "a stage" or a more serious case.

"There are two things I stick to, as a busy parent. I only ever cook once [even if she and her partner eat later] and I don't ever offer an alternative." Children, she insists, will eat if they are hungry.

She might have me already. I typically try to take a hard line on alternatives but the dad is the weak link. The three-year-old may barely give her meal the finger, before moving on to a bowl of strawberries.

Grant says she always has at least one vegetable on her kids' plates. "Even if they don't eat it, it's there every night," she says. "I do say they should taste everything but you have to respect there are some things they will dislike."

Grant is also big on not dumbing down food. "Most children actually welcome things that taste good and have flavour," she says. And having spent a lot of time in Italy, she says she's struck by how at ease most children are when dining in restaurants there. Not to mention the welcome absence of kids' menus. "There's quite a lot we can learn from that," she says.

The next piece of advice is to involve them in the kitchen. We certainly do that. Each of them will enthusiastically make pancakes, bake a cake or assist with a meal but will inexplicably lose their appetites when it hits the table (except for the sweet stuff).

My eyes glaze a bit, too, when Grant says she believes in giving kids a varied diet. It's not bad advice, just obvious and I'm a little fatigued from trying to do it. I try to keep my disillusionment in check, pushing away thoughts of foods my eldest once ate but has since abandoned – she and I debrief when I get home. "Look, Mum, I'm getting better," she says. Maybe she's right. And in a few years I, too, will be able to write it off as "just a stage". In the meantime, we have one happy dog.



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*The Silver Spoon for Children, Phaidon Press, \$29.95.*



**Hard line ... Amanda Grant never offers her children an alternative meal to the one cooked.**