

Playing the hunger games at our house

When I picked Daniel up from his first day of day care last week, his new teacher commented on two things. At naptime he had sung happily to himself for two hours instead of napping. “And he has an amazing appetite!”

That describes our boy—and his brother too. Of course, I can’t take any credit for our sons’ willingness and ability to eat, especially since we met them as toddlers. Both of our boys just happen to be fantastic eaters.

Whether a child joins your family through birth or adoption, a healthy appetite is certainly not a given. We know other families who have adopted internationally whose children have had eating issues, likely because food was not always available to them. Some children hoard food. Others reject food with certain textures.

My biggest food challenge with Daniel turned out to be one I had never anticipated. He couldn’t stand to watch me cook. To be able to see and smell the food and not get to eat it was terribly frustrating for him—and for me, as I tried to cook and he stood screaming with tears running down his cheeks.



For a while I couldn’t understand why he was so upset—even angry—with me for cooking. Then, one day, I thought back to our time in China. About a week after we met Daniel, we traveled to his orphanage. John stayed outside holding our little boy—we didn’t want him to be confused—and I went inside to meet the people who had cared for him.

The orphanage director showed me the rooms where the children slept and played. Then she showed me the room where the food was prepared. When the food was ready, she told me, they called the children, and our boy was always first in line. I told her—through an interpreter—that I wasn’t surprised to hear that, and we

laughed together.

It was one night while I was cooking and Daniel was crying—and Leo was asking me why Daniel was sad—that it hit me. Of course, our little guy was upset. He had never seen food prepared. He thought it was always ready to eat.

Finally I got it. It wasn't that he was impatient. It wasn't that our happy-go-lucky boy waited until 4:30 every afternoon to have a meltdown. And it wasn't that he hated having me cook. It was that he thought I was withholding food from him.

I realized I had to change my approach. I started feeding the boys whatever I had ready while I cooked. I gave them noodles or edamame or cheese or grapes or yogurt—anything I had that was nutritious and ready. Then while they ate, I cooked the rest of the meal. It wasn't a perfect solution, and some days worked better than others. Some problems take time and understanding—and I am grateful that I was able to visit Daniel's orphanage and figure out why he might be angry to see me doing a simple task.



(As you can see, we're still mastering our chopstick technique, but the boys both love to use them.)

Now that we have been home for more than nine months, we have a better rhythm—and a better kitchen relationship. Daniel understands that I need to cook dinner before he can eat it. I still try to have something for the children to nibble on while I'm cooking—and it keeps them safely away from the stove.

Lately I have a new issue. Daniel has decided he understands so much about cooking that he is going to be the chef himself. He pulls a chair into the kitchen, announcing, "Hep you, Mama! Hep you!" When I can, I give him a task. The other day when we visited John's parents, he pulled a chair up to her sink and jumped up to help Grammy rinse ears of corn.



As I watch my sons getting taller by the day, I have a feeling those appetites are only going to grow. It's good that someone else wants to help with the cooking.