

AZ R 6-28-98

Experts question Spock's diet advice

By Jane E. Brody
New York Times

The late Dr. Benjamin Spock, arguably the most influential pediatrician in history, has left children and their parents with a surprising and rather demanding legacy: advice that they stick to a vegetarian diet devoid of all dairy products after the age of 2.

In the seventh edition of his world-famous book, *Baby and Child Care*, issued last month by Pocket Books just weeks after his death at 94, Spock recommends an approach to childhood nutrition that many experts, including his co-author, Dr.

Steven Parker, consider too extreme and likely to result in nutritional deficiencies unless it is very carefully planned and executed.

"We now know that there are harmful effects of a meaty diet," the new book tells parents. "Children can get plenty of protein and iron from vegetables, beans and other plant foods that avoid the fat and cholesterol that are in animal products."

As for dairy foods, Spock says, "I no longer recommend dairy products after the age of 2 years. Other calcium sources offer many advantages that dairy products do

not have."

Given the influence of *Baby and Child Care*, pediatricians and nutritionists have reacted with concern to Spock's new recommendations to raise children on an all-plant, or vegan, diet. In the book's 52-year history as a best-seller (second only to the Bible), parents continue to rely heavily on Spock as an authoritative guide to raising children.

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, a pediatrician specializing in child behavior at Boston City Hospital and a long-time admirer and friend of Spock, called his new dietary recommendations "absolutely insane."

"I don't agree with them at all," Brazelton said. "A vegetarian diet doesn't make any sense. Meat is an excellent source of the iron and protein children need, and to take milk away from children — I think that's really dangerous. Milk is needed for calcium and vitamin D."

Experts expressed concern about the ability of small children to consume enough calories and fat on an all-plant diet to sustain normal growth. They also questioned the diet's adequacy in supplying recommended amounts of such essential nutrients as calcium, riboflavin, vitamin D, iron, zinc and possibly

for kids

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even protein. In addition, they said that having to follow a vegetarian diet free of dairy products could place undue social pressures on children, few of whom like to be different from their friends.

"Raising children on an all-plant diet can be done, but it would be like climbing Mount Everest," said Dr. Michael Georgiess, professor of pediatrics and child development at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis. "It would take an incredible amount of planning and balancing of nutrients."

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Georgiess, who wrote the chapter on vegetarian diets in the American Academy of Pediatrics nutrition handbook, said that a strictly vegetarian diet "involves very significant risks. It would probably provide only about 60 percent of a small child's calorie needs and maybe the same proportion of protein and would require supplementation with vitamin D, calcium, iron and zinc."

Dr. Marc Jacobson, a specialist in adolescent medicine at Schneider Children's Hospital in New Hyde Park, N.Y., said, "If a strict vegetarian diet is part of someone's long-term culture, the kids grow fine, though not as big. But for those who became vegans recently, I can't say it's dangerous, but there are risks."

Starting with the first edition of his landmark book in 1946, Spock always included meat and milk products as part of a child's recommended diet. Spock's revisions of what had been his most recent nutritional advice — to include small amounts of lean animal foods in children's diets — stemmed from a switch he himself made to an all-plant diet in 1991, following a series of illnesses that left him weak and unable to walk unaided. His wife, Mary Morgan, said

his health rebounded after he made the dietary change. He lost 50 pounds, regained his ability to walk and became healthier overall and more energetic, she said.

"It enabled him to revise his book before he died, which was his most important goal," Morgan said.

Dr. Neal Barnard of the Physicians for Responsible Medicine, a Washington-based organization that advocates vegetarian diets for everyone, said that he had drafted the section on nutrition in the new edition of Spock's book, but that Spock had edited it to give it "his personal touch."

Morgan said that "Ben had a hand in every part of the book" and that he was "very committed" to the diet.

"It is not difficult at all to get complete nutrition on a vegan diet if it is supplemented with vitamin D and B-12," Barnard said. He said diet-related problems like obesity and atherosclerosis begin in childhood and added, "Today's kids are in worse health than ever before."

But Parker, the book's co-author and an expert in behavioral pediatrics at Boston Medical Center, objected to the stringency of the dietary advice and suggested that parents at least be offered two options. However, Spock rejected this idea, telling Parker that he wanted his book to be "in the fore-

vegetarian diet for kids

front" of the growing awareness of the link between animal foods and disease.

Parker said a vegetarian diet "can be healthy for kids" if parents make sure children obtain all the nutrients they need, but he does not believe people had to be vegetarian as children to adopt the diet as adults.

Still, he said, "I think the book is a terrific book. There was no other area in which we had a disagreement."

Nutrition experts strongly disagreed with Spock's advice to avoid dairy foods. The book states that "most green leafy vegetables and beans have a form of calcium that is absorbed as well as or even a bit better than that in milk."

But the experts noted that calcium-rich vegetables contain substances like oxalates, phytates and other fibers that interfere with calcium absorption. (Spock also suggested calcium-fortified soy milk and orange juice as sources of this mineral that is critical to the proper development of bones.)

Brazelton said the advice was "neither parent-friendly nor child-friendly." He pointed out that "although vegetarian families, if they are very careful and conscientious, can eat a balanced diet, most children in their second and third year are in such rebellion about food, it's hard to get them to eat any vegetables. This recommendation

puts pressure on parents who in turn will put pressure on their kids."

Older children, too, would face added pressure, he and others said, when forced to eat differently from their friends.

Susan Adams, a registered dietitian and nutrition educator at the University of Washington in Seattle, said, "By restricting children's diets so much, they can't interact normally in social situations with other children. What's a birthday party without ice cream? Having to be treated separately is hard on kids."

It can also be hard on parents, who might have to spend more time preparing meals, including box lunches, for their children.

"Rice and pasta can be quick to fix, but cooking beans and other vegetarian foods takes time. It's not the way most people live today. Parents shouldn't be made to feel guilty or that they are putting their children at risk nutritionally because they make other choices," Adams said.

Leslie Bonci, a dietitian in private practice in Pittsburgh, said parents who decide to raise their children on a plant-based diet must make vegetarianism a family affair.

"Children are so influenced by what their parents are and are not eating, they will balk if their parents don't eat what they do," Bonci said.