

Childhood behavior: Are they what they eat?

By Kristi Wees

A friend texted me this week: “Do any of your kids have a crazy reaction to candy? I mean behavior. I am noticing a pattern.”

I texted her back, “Yes, and it is not necessarily the sugar. Did the candy contain dyes?”

As a chemist, food has always fascinated me, not necessarily on the cooking side of things (as I am a bit challenged in that department) but in the way in which the chemicals in food interact with our bodies and how they influence health, behavior and mood.

The friend, who texted me, had noticed that her son’s behavior worsened dramatically after two back-to-back birthday parties. And when I say worsened, I mean he went from being a happy, energetic six-year-old to an angry, frustrated, aggressive, mean-spirited, and at times, violent kiddo who Grandma may have suggested needed a good dose of “discipline”.

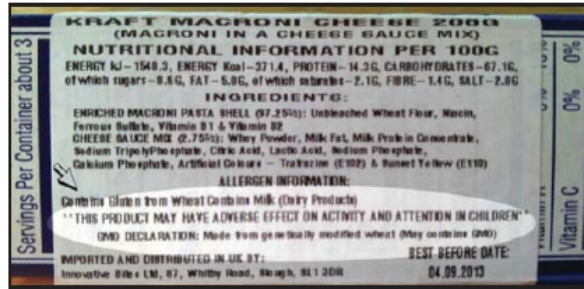
Many people’s first instinct is always to blame THE SUGAR. But what if I told you there may be something that holds much more power over many children’s behavior. Consider this experiment done in 2003 by Dr. Jim Stevenson: After

obtaining a baseline IQ on twins, he put one on a diet free of food and snacks containing additives (including food dyes) for two weeks, the other ate his normal, additive-containing diet. When their IQ’s were retested, the child eating the additive free diet showed a 15 percent increase in IQ score over his brother, as well as a calmer demeanor.

Hmm, SUGAR was not cut from either twin’s diet, just dyes and preservatives. Could there be a connection between bad behavior, ADD, ADHD or even Autism and food? Scouring the last 20 years of published scientific literature would suggest there is some connection. Talk to mothers of children who have modified the diet of their children, removing dyes and preservatives and other potentially troubling ingredients, like dairy, gluten, salicylates, histamine, glutamates and you will find much more support for the science!

Dr. Jim Stevenson, who did the

twin study above, went on to complete a randomized, double blind placebo controlled study (the gold standard as far as research studies go!) in 2007. The paper published in the *Lancet* concluded: “Artificial colors or a sodium benzoate preservative (or both) in the diet result in increased hyperactivity in three-year-old and eight/nine-year-old children in the general population.”



In 2010 the European Union changed its labeling rules for food companies, requiring them to label any foods containing a certain type of dye (azo dye) to state “may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children”. These same dyes, five years later, are still being used in the United States in food products for children without a warning label.

So what is a mom to do? If your child is showing signs of behavioral challenges, consider a little experiment of your own. Remove artificial dyes for a period of two weeks and see if there is an improvement in your child. This is the elimination diet recommended since the 1970s by Dr. Doris Rapp, a pioneer in uncovering the relationship between behavior and food additives. Since there is ZERO nutritional value of dyes; which are found primarily in the unhealthiest of foods, your child’s nutrition should not suffer and actually may be enhanced by your choices.

Does this sound overwhelming and are you thinking, “What will my child eat?” Take a few deep breaths and a few baby steps, you can do this!

1. Identify the dyes in foods in your pantry, refrigerator and freezer. Luckily you don’t need to be a chemist to figure this out. Most all dyes in the USA contain a number like red 40, blue 1, yellow 6, etc. so they are easy to spot on the label.
2. Donate, toss or use up those products.
3. Go shopping at a store like Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, the East End Food Co-Op, or Sunnybridge Natural Foods that specialize in foods that are free of dyes and preservatives. Giant Eagle and Aldi’s also carry dye-free products.
4. Read the labels! Read the ingredients

and look for any colors and numbers. If they are listed, put it back on the shelf.

5. Enjoy your new-found treats with your children, and stay strong for two weeks, taking note of improvements in behaviors!

6. Keeping a behavior/mood journal for those two weeks can be very helpful. At the end of the two weeks review your notes and determine if there was any improvement.

7. The true test is to re-introduce the dyes. Let your kids go pick a "special" treat that contains dyes, one which they ate before the experiment began. After they eat it, see what their response is. Did their behavior change? Did they become more aggressive or combative, more frustrated or more indecisive? After this step, you should have your answer if your child is sensitive to dyes.

There are many other food chemicals that individuals can be sensitive to beyond dyes. Preservatives and artificial flavors are other categories that many people react to, containing chemicals like sodium benzoate, MSG (monosodium glutamate), nitrates and sulphites. One other category of food chemicals that a child may be reacting to is high histamine foods which can include naturally occurring histamines in foods like aged cheeses, processed meats, dried fruits and vinegar containing foods (to name a few).

Moms and dads must put on their detective hats when looking for food sensitivities. A child's behavior matches how they feel. If they feel miserable and sick because they are reacting to what they are eating, their behavior is sure to reflect that. It is not easy, but I promise you that doing the work to investigate your child's sensitivities will pay off in the end, through seeing your true child's personality shine through.

Helpful Resources:

- www.babyfoodsteps.com
- www.nourishinghope.com
- www.unblindmymind.org
- www.fedup.com.au
- www.feingold.org
- cspinet.org/new/pdf/food-dyes-rainbow-of-risks.pdf ■

Kristi Wees is a mom, chemist, advocate and blogger who lives north of Pittsburgh with her husband and two children. She has a passion for helping parents navigate the maze of scientific and medical information, in order to make the parenting decisions that are best for their own family. She blogs at babyfoodsteps.com.



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