

# My Mother the Fridge, My Father the Microwave

Food is rarely just about food

---

“I’m not going to eat it!”

“Well, you’ll just have to starve then!”

“Okay, fine. I’ll starve!”

Food is rarely *just* about food. Food is also a way of talking about things that have got nothing to do with meat or fish or vegetables. In families, food is also a way of talking about dependence and independence. How much do I take whatever my parents give me and how much do I insist on making my own choices?

“If you don’t like what the rest of us are having, then you can cook for yourself!”

“That’s no problem. I will!”

“And you can pay for it yourself, too!”

Food can be a way of fighting other people, a way of controlling other people:

“You’ll eat what you’re given!”

“No, I won’t! And you can’t make me!”

Whenever we talk about food, it’s worth wondering whether we’re really talking about a quality of parenting. Food has lots of parental qualities: it soothes, comforts and consoles us. At other times, it seems horrible or boring and not what we want at all:

“There’s never anything to eat in this house!”

“Rubbish! There’s plenty of stuff in the fridge!”

“Yeah, but nothing I want!”

We feel about food the way we feel about love. When a son or daughter is eating too much, it might be his or her way of saying, “I feel constantly empty inside!” or “I want lots of love and can’t seem to stop wanting more!” Whenever a son or daughter is refusing to eat, it might be a way of being angry, a way of saying, “You’ve got nothing I want!” or “You’ve got no idea what I really need!” Not eating might be a way of keeping control, “You can’t make me do things I don’t want to do!” or it might be a way of controlling other people by keeping them worried. Certainly, a good way for sons and daughters to upset their parents is not to eat, especially if one parent has spent a

# My Mother the Fridge, My Father the Microwave

Food is rarely just about food

---

lot of time cooking the food. As a tactic, this works every time because it's so hurtful. For parents, it feels as if their best love isn't enough. But for children and young people, Phillips (2000) argues, refusing to eat or being unable to stop eating "...are experiments in living. Children put out probes to their parents, samples of their internal worlds, as rudimentary forms of such experiments. What kind of mother or father will I have, or create, if I say I'm not going to bed, or say I love my teacher more than my mother, or indeed, if I refuse to eat, or eat too much? What we think of as eating disorders are elaborated versions of these common childhood scenarios. Most children.... experiment with not eating and tend to get a rather vivid message back from their parents which, in its turn, modifies the experiment" (p287).

Therapists talk about people having a relationship with food. What they mean is that the way we feel about food is to do with other important things in our lives: to do with feelings and relationships. So it's important not to take 'food' at face value but to think of children and young people's behaviour with food as their way of trying to say something, as their way of drawing attention to something. Food is rarely just about food.

Ref: Phillips, A. (2000) *Promises, Promises*. London: Faber.