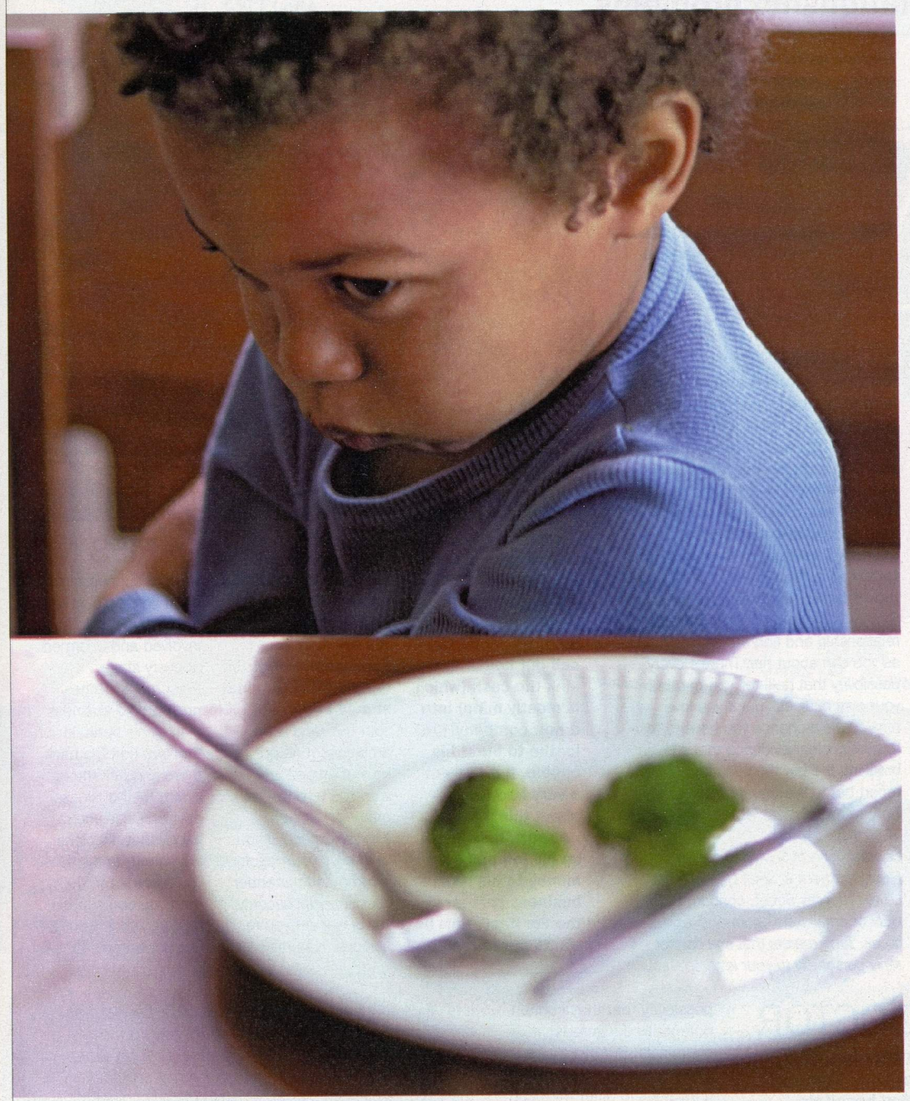
Rachel Carlyle

Can parents ever win the great food fight, asks our expert



It all started with a bowl of puréed celeriac. That's when the Great Food War broke out between a friend and her 10-month-old daughter, and hostilities are still raging three years later. Except that the daily skirmishes are not confined to the oddly named vegetables we so desperately want our children to love. They fight about meat (too tough), fruit (too sticky), vegetables (too green) and brown bread (too everything). "Every meal time has been a battle since Lily first started refusing new foods, starting with that blasted celeriac," says my friend. "I never meant for this to happen but now I have to bargain with her to eat anything healthy. I'm turning into this witchy-eyed harridan who won't let her down from the table until she has eaten six peas."

Hers is not an uncommon story, according to child psychologist Tanya Byron, who has dealt with her fair share of food refusniks on her TV programme *House of Tiny Tearaways*. She believes problems with food stem from the weaning process – when we're all encouraged to get into a frenzy of puréeing to give the baby a special diet separate from the rest of the family. The trouble is, we're investing too much emotional energy in the process. "I did it too – made green mush that looked incredibly unappetising," says Dr Byron, author of *Your Toddler Month by Month* (DK, £16.99). "I remember my husband asking, 'do you think she likes it?' I said, 'I don't care, it's good for her.' He, quite sensibly, said, 'Let's step back, allow her to enjoy food'.

"The trouble is, food is such a primeval thing: it's the basic component of a child's development, it's the colour in their cheeks. And once we see there's a problem we do all the wrong things. Our anxiety stops the child eating, and before you know it you have got into this cycle. Once you get into, 'just one more, just one more spoon for Mummy,' you are doomed."

Experts believe parents can win the war, but you have to step back first. As long as the child knows you care deeply, they will use it against you. After all, it's not a war about food, it's a war about power, with food used as the heavy guns.

"The most important thing is to step out of the fight, immediately," advises Karen Doherty, co-author of *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* (Bantam Press, £12.99). "If you're standing there watching them eat, counting bites, you have to stop. You are putting pressure on your children and perpetuating the cycle. If it takes turning away or leaving the room, so be it.

"Talk about anything else at the table other than food. Heap lots of positive attention on the child but nothing about the meal. Everyone will then relax." If that means they're not eating much, then so be it. They won't starve, so don't be tempted to give them a yoghurt and banana later.

Karen thinks the best way to win the war is to eat as a family – even if this does condemn you to several years of supper at 5pm – because it removes the focus from the child and stops you hovering over their every mouthful with that slightly menacing, mummy-bright smile. It also helps to get physical with the children: a run round the park before tea will make them hungrier, and hence less fussy.

You need to keep offering new foods, but silently. "Some children are fussy and have to see a food 10 or 20 times before they will try it, so it's important to keep putting different food out without making a fuss; in the end they will eat it," says Karen's co-author Georgia Coleridge.

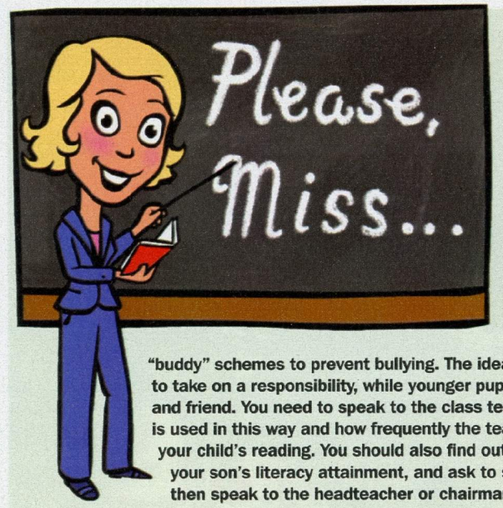
"Some parents know they will eat only peas, so they keep producing those and no other vegetables. But what happens when they get fed up with peas?"

Karen's brilliant idea has certainly worked in our house: put out a plate of cut-up fruit and/or vegetables a few minutes before you serve a meal. They're hungry and will eat it, and you get the quiet satisfaction of some of their five-a-day target being ticked.

Mind you, even that can require perseverance. Karen put out raw carrots, celery, tomatoes, and olives before every single evening meal for four months and not one of her four children touched them.

"When one starting eating them, the others followed and now they get irritated if there are no vegetables or fruit on the table in the evening," she says. "Say nothing, make no comment – that's the secret. If you say something you go down that awful path of 'if you eat three more peas you can have pudding'."

Best-selling children's author Debi Gliori (*Witch Baby and Me*, Corgi, £4.99) has honed her techniques on five children, aged from 11 to 31, and she thinks the secret is never to offer exciting alternatives to the meal in front of them. "If any of them didn't like what I was serving, then they could have a peanut butter sandwich. It's amazing how boring peanut butter sandwiches become after a while and they come back to eating what's on the table. During those times I kept clinging on to the fact that tastes change and mature, although I have to say quite a lot of peanut butter was consumed." S



Education expert Dorothy Lepkowska answers your questions

My child's school has a peer mentoring system, where older pupils help to teach younger ones to read. My six-year-old is a good reader, but since this method was introduced I don't feel he's made any progress. I feel awkward interfering as the school is very enthusiastic about this scheme, but I don't believe this is an effective way of teaching. Kate M, Brighton

Schools use peer mentoring in a variety of ways ranging from the classroom methods you describe, to counselling and break-time "buddy" schemes to prevent bullying. The idea is to build confidence and allow older pupils to take on a responsibility, while younger pupils benefit from having an older role model and friend. You need to speak to the class teacher and find out how often peer mentoring is used in this way and how frequently the teacher, or a classroom assistant, listens to your child's reading. You should also find out if the teacher keeps a progress report on your son's literacy attainment, and ask to see it. If this information is not forthcoming, then speak to the headteacher or chairman of governors and tell them your worries.

Write to Dorothy at S Magazine, 10 Lower Thames St, London EC3R 6EN or email sundaymag@express.co.uk

Book cupboard

Best for... teenage holidaymakers

Lily dreams of what life would be like without her squabbling parents, and when she is accidentally left at a service station on her way to holiday, she gets a chance to find out. *That's Life, Lily (Faber, £5.99)* is a dark novel that keeps you guessing and is a hit in the author's native France. Aimed at aged 12-plus. In *Empty Quarter* by the brilliant Julia Golding, our heroine Darcie is trapped on board a cruise ship, but things look up when she becomes embroiled in a kidnapping plot that takes her to the heart of the desert *(Egmont, £5.99)*. For those lighter, beach moments try the *Summer Camp Secrets* series by Melissa J Morgan – American froth but none the worse for that. There are 12 books so far *(Usborne, £4.99)*. To order all titles, see Express Bookshop, page 90.

Old favourites

Airfix

Few names conjure up the spirit of a post-war childhood like Airfix, the iconic kit maker who made a generation of eight-year-old boys very happy. I'd always wondered why it was called Airfix but, as it turns out, the founder, Hungarian refugee Nicholas Kove, made inflated toys – and fixing air into the rubber was part of the process. In the late 40s he was approached by Ferguson to make a promotional model of a tractor for their sales teams. The model proved so popular that Kove made them for sale, in kit form so they would be cheaper. Woolworths then asked him to make a Golden Hind model in 1952, which was followed by the famous Spitfire a year later. Airfix boomed until the early 1980s. Last year, however, Hornby bought it and has revitalised the brand, launching new models, such as Dr Who's Light and Sound Tardis (£24.99) and Shaun the Sheep (with Land Rover £22.99). In John Lewis, Argos and Toys R Us or see www.airfix.com.