

Did What Our Parents Never Knew Hurt Us?

Navigating the New Normal

WHEN I WAS PREGNANT, I made one promise to myself. I would not be like my parents.

Neurotic to the core, they wanted to rush me to the emergency room every time I coughed, sure I was choking on a chicken bone (even though I'm pretty sure no one has ever found a bone in a McNugget).

I was going to let my children get scrapes on their knees and sneeze without fear of alarming their parents. I wasn't going to panic over a runny nose or sitting too close to the television.

And I was right. I am nothing like my parents. Because my special breed of neurosis is unique to the generation of climate change, consumer recalls, and information overload.

My hypochondria lies less in the here and now and more in whether my decisions will increase the likelihood of cancer in my children decades down the road. And if the Facebook groups, message boards, online forums, and chat rooms are any indication, many mothers in the 21st century are racked with environmental guilt, confusion, and panic.

In addition to the age-old, daunting task of raising a happy, healthy baby, we are bombarded with new and contradictory research concerning environmental toxins, long-term product effects, and the far-reaching impact of every item we purchase and decision

we make. We want the world to be a better place not just for our children, but for the planet, which seems to be in dire peril.

Never has a generation been so inundated with conflicting information. We are the internet generation, and saying “what we don’t know won’t hurt us” is no longer an option when the answers are at our fingertips.

Most parents just want to do right by their children and society. We want to leave the world a better place and raise a better generation. We know that our voices count, and we are voting with everything we purchase, eat, and wear.

And with all this knowledge, we feel like we have no excuse for making the wrong decision. In the unachievable quest for parental perfection, all this information can be too much burden to carry.

Over the past five years, I’ve used my blog and social media to engage readers and experts, answering your questions on everything from leaching plastics to safer sunscreens to K-Cup addiction. On a quest to make green living more practical, manageable, and affordable, I searched high and low for the best hacks, bargains, and shortcuts to sort through the noise and find solutions that work. At the same time, health activists, dedicated brands, and a few forward-thinking policymakers have created significant progress. We’ve seen a consumer petition sway Kraft to remove artificial preservatives and dyes, various for-profit organizations offer rewards for recycling, and organizations gain national publicity for lobbying against the waste of misshapen tomatoes.¹

But for every step forward, we often take two steps back, second-guessing our choices or just feeling too overwhelmed to care.

Sadly, it’s pretty understandable when a family on a limited budget living in a “food desert” buys soda in bulk and embraces the McDonald’s Dollar Menu.

But even some families armed with information and access appear oblivious when it comes to better food and product choices.

Why are well-meaning parents who pore over preschool options

and violin lessons still making Cheez-Its—which use a chemical for “freshness” that the Toxicology Data Network links to chronic neurotoxic effects—the default snack?² Why is sugar-laden Gatorade a reasonable beverage option for toddlers and artificially flavored Munchkin donut holes still the preferred school birthday snack? Why does my son keep asking me for bubble gum and feeling like the only one who can’t go to the Mister Softee truck?

Joellen, a 38-year-old working mother of two in Moorestown, NJ, talks to me about why these things are still on her shopping list.

“ Sometimes I get caught up in this mindset that there are so many environmental dangers, why bother doing this because in the end, it’s not going to make a difference? ”

But Joellen says the biggest problem is feeling like she only has the ability to worry about a certain number of things—she just doesn’t have the capacity to add this to her guilt.

“ I feel like it has taken up all of my energy and time worrying about and controlling so many other things in my children’s lives—making sure they’re not getting too much screen time, making sure they’re getting enough exercise, making sure I’m reading to them at night and practicing their numbers and letters. ”

Liz, a Philadelphia mother of two, offers the same sentiment of incapacitating panic.

“ I am worried about the chemicals in ‘dollar store Barbie’ and wonder if I should be more concerned. But then I forget about it because life is crazy and I don’t have time to worry about every possible danger. Did I brush their teeth this morning? Are they eating healthy, balanced meals? Did I wash my hands before I pumped this milk? Did I pay attention to them equally? You could go crazy. Thank god for Zoloft, although I worry about taking worry medication! ”

Meghan, a mom in Mentor, OH, is equally overwhelmed.

“ I feel like I’m constantly making lists on my phone of things to avoid or new brands to try out. I try to pay attention, stay informed, read labels, and research, but I am not always successful at that. Sometimes, I just want a bowl of Rice Krispies. ”

These mothers’ feelings of being overwhelmed make perfect sense. I can certainly understand the limited bandwidth for guilt.

A few years ago I cut out cow’s milk as a way to decrease congestion. I discovered almond milk as an alternative and started using more than a gallon a week—in my oatmeal, my coffee, my protein shakes, my homemade ice cream.

But in the midst of California’s historic drought, some have called for a boycott of my beloved almond milk. Eighty percent of the world’s almond supply comes from that one state, where it takes 1.1 gallons of water to grow a single nut.³

Despite that knowledge, giving up almond milk has been beyond my personal capabilities for environmental good.

Bandwidth aside, Joellen also says she hasn’t taken the time to really educate and inform herself.

“ I feel like there’s a lot of information out there, and I need to get the right information. I have a general sense of awareness from the media, but I don’t want to jump on any bandwagon before I do the research myself—which is on my to-do list. ”

Joellen says she needs to feel like it isn’t being “shoved down her throat by someone else” and wants to take the time to educate herself about the real difference between two products.

“ Why haven’t I taken the time to educate myself? Do I really want to open that Pandora’s box? Do I really want to start to know what I am exposed to? Because, then, how do I sleep at night? I just can’t add that additional layer of stress and pressure on my life. ”

But Joellen also acknowledges that she has only allowed herself to live in blissful ignorance because she hasn’t had to deal with any visible effects from the traditional supermarket lifestyle.

“ I’ve been fortunate that in the microcosm of my life, my kids don’t have any significant allergies or health problems. So I’ve never had to do that self-examination, like, ‘Is there something I’m doing that’s causing this?’ ”

Another somewhat surprising realization from my talk with parents has been their admissions of “blind product loyalty,” perhaps a leftover hallmark of the Pepsi generation. Joellen says she doesn’t know if an organic brand of chocolate sandwich cookies would taste the same. She says her kids would notice a subtle difference, and even she will miss the pleasure of that familiar taste.

It sounds like the true impetus to change is familiarity, as her kids have completely embraced Annie’s Organic Cheddar Bunnies as an alternative to Goldfish. Why? Because they see other kids eating Cheddar Bunnies. They *know* Cheddar Bunnies.

But if she sees Cheerios right next to Cascadian Farm Organic O’s for the same price, which will she buy?

“ *Cheerios.* ”

We can probably all relate to brand loyalty on some level. My personal brand loyalty has been to Heinz Ketchup, as no other ketchup tastes quite right to me. Fortunately, the brand now offers an organic variety, which I am willing to pay a bit more for. (They also offer a third option called Simply Heinz, which uses real sugar in lieu of high-fructose corn syrup. I am continually curious why Simply Heinz isn’t just, you know, Heinz.)

Ryan, a father of two, also confesses an ingrained trust in the brands he knew as a child.

“ *We buy things we see in commercials not even thinking about it because we instinctively trust the brands. We see the same boxes from our childhood and don’t consider that the ingredients or manufacturing process may have changed.* ”

But once things hit mainstream news, it can be a scary wake-up call.

“ We always saw Purdue as a trusted family brand, but then we saw some TV exposé about what’s really going on at these poultry factory farms—it’s not the same as 50 years ago. When we saw that, we started buying organic chicken. ”

For parents like Joellen, brand loyalty extends to the general comfort zone we were raised in—like the definition of “clean.” Our parents found solace in the crisp, cool blue of a window cleaner bottle, rather than feeling like they were punched in the face by ammonia.

“ I tried a green cleaning service with DIY products and just felt like it wasn’t working. The surfaces didn’t feel the same. ”

While she recognizes her preconceived notion of “clean” is misguided, it’s also a long way to go from bleach to vinegar. There are plenty of happy mediums along the way, and Joellen feels like she’s finally ready to start taking the small steps.

“ If I can just start with the things that my family uses the most, I can get the most bang for my buck. ”

My hope is that this book will give you the tools to get that bang for your buck—financially, emotionally, and environmentally. We can lift the crushing weight off our shoulders and arm ourselves with bite-size pieces of information to increase our positive impact and our imprint.

Robyn O’Brien, a former food industry analyst, author of *The Unhealthy Truth*, and founder of the AllergyKids Foundation, is a calming yet commanding voice in the sea change.

“ You can look at all of this startling information and it feels like a tsunami coming at you and you experience total paralysis. But then I look at the four kids in my backyard and think, ‘I can’t not do something.’ ”

One parent alone cannot hold back a tsunami, but we can form a thunderclap. And these thunderclaps are happening in corporate

boardrooms, on the congressional floor, and in the nation's playgrounds.

This book will show you how parents can take on behemoth corporations, city councils, school districts, and their own opinionated 3rd graders—and win. We can't do everything, but we *can do something*. And we are exponentially stronger together.