

Odd man in

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By Savita Iyer Ahrestani



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Several times during the week, my six-year-old son stated emphatically: "I don't want to go to school on Friday."

Stand out: Being unlike the rest makes your child unique, not weird.

Granted, he only joined this school recently, but except for a few ups and downs and general reluctance to resume holidays, he has been quite happy there. Why, then, was he suddenly so adamant about not going?

"Because Friday is Hot Dog Day," he finally told me.

Ah ha! Hot Dog Day, and my son is a vegetarian.

Few people know that, though, and certainly, no one in his new school knew it. All the kids in his class had signed up for hot dogs and the boy sitting next to him — he deeply admires — had asked for two. "I'm

too shy to tell them I don't eat meat, so that's why I'm not going to school," my son said.

He did have a point: What would it look like if he, the New Guy, brought in his usual cheese sandwiches, while everyone else chomped on sausages?

For a while, I didn't know what to say and I flashed back to my own, rather painful, vegetarian childhood.

I grew up in Geneva, Switzerland, at a time when you were definitely on the outs if you were vegetarian. The paediatrician we went to was convinced that my mother was under-nourishing my brother and me by feeding us vegetarian food, even though she tried in vain to tell him about generations of Hindu Brahmins like us who had grown up quite healthy and lived fairly long lives on vegetarian diets.

Although my parents gave us the choice of eating whatever we wanted, I never developed much of a taste for meat until later in life, but I was too shy to say anything to anyone and did my best to hide the fact that I was vegetarian.

Today, things are very different, and vegetarianism is accepted, even if it's not the done thing in many circles. But how to convince a child, who wants nothing more than to fit in with his peers, of that and to tell him his ethical concerns (he recently discovered that meat comes from animals and this has fuelled his desire not to eat it) are actually something to be proud of?

As relieved as I was that his reluctance to go to school was not due to anything deeper, I still found it hard to convince my boy that it's okay to be vegetarian. Of course, I wanted him to be secure about his dietary choices, proud of them, even. But I also knew not eating what the rest ate would almost certainly set my son apart from his peers.

Still, I tried, as a parent must.

"It's okay if you don't eat meat," I said. "And you may not be the only one not getting a hot dog — I mean, even if someone eats other kinds of

meat, maybe they don't like hot dogs."

My son was convinced otherwise. "I'll only go to school if YOU come and tell them why I'm not getting a hot dog," he replied.

That settled it.

On Hot Dog Day, we entered school together, my son tightly clutching my hand. The "hot dog lady" (a mother who collects money from all the kids who want sausages, then organizes their distribution during the lunch hour) approached us, her son jingling the coin box.

"Come on, Sasha, give me your hot dog money," the boy said, wiggling the money box under my son's nose. My son, eyes downcast, squeezed my hand, and with a racing heart, I answered for him: "Sasha's not getting a hot dog."

The jingling stopped and, for a second, all the children milling about the hallway seemed to stop.

"He's not getting a hot dog?" the boy repeated, seemingly incredulous that someone would not get a hot dog. "How come?"

"Because he doesn't eat meat. He's a vegetarian."

There. I had said it.

"What's a vegetarian?" the boy wondered.

I was about to answer when a little voice piped in.

"I know," a small girl said. "A vegetarian is someone who doesn't eat meat. My mom's one."

"So is mine," someone else chimed in. "My mom says it's healthier to be vegetarian."

Suddenly, the hallway was full of babble. Everyone, it seemed, knew what a vegetarian was. Many of their parents were vegetarian. One little girl said she only ate fish, and so, she definitely wasn't getting a hot dog. The hot dog lady admired my son's sensibilities.

"He's so young, yet he doesn't eat meat because it comes from animals," she marvelled.

My son wasn't holding on to my hand any more, he was racing into class with the rest of the children, happy and secure.

Since that day, there have been several Hot Dog Days and my son always takes in his cream cheese sandwiches. He is now known in class as "The Vegetarian" — a name he lives up to with pride because he knows that that's how his classmates have accepted him.

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