

Angie Creel

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Condiment Kid

My son's relationship with ketchup was a source of amusement and frustration for the entire family. Not only did he put ketchup on everything, from his chicken nuggets and french fries to his scrambled eggs and oatmeal, but he also insisted on keeping the bottle on the dining table every day, alongside the salt and pepper. Every meal was a battle.

One evening, as I was serving dinner, I noticed that, once again, he had a bottle of ketchup in his hand. I sighed out of frustration, ready to berate his choices, when my husband said, "It's okay. Let him have it." I looked at him in surprise as he gave me a knowing smile.

I set the dinner plates on the table and watched as my son squirted the ketchup all over his meal. He was so pleased with himself that he even tried to get his older sister to do the same by aiming the valve of the ketchup bottle her way, but she just laughed and made a face out of annoyance.

I persuaded, "Why can't you just eat your food without ketchup? Everyone else is doing it."

My son looked at me with a hurt expression. "But I like ketchup. It makes my food taste better," he said.

I exhaled, feeling upset that he needed to mask the meal I spent time preparing with just the perfect amount of seasonings but also feeling guilty. I knew I was being unreasonable, and making him feel bad for expressing his opinion was wrong.

I put my arm around him and said, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Of course, you can have ketchup if you want it. I'm just trying to make sure you're eating healthy."

My son smiled at me and commented, "This is healthy, Momma. It's smashed-up tomatoes."

The dining table erupted in laughter. My daughter fell out of her chair while my other daughter shot water across the table from her nose. All the while, my son looked confused as he had just given us some educational information on tomatoes, and somehow it was captured as something silly. Without missing a beat, my husband teased, "Wouldn't that be like salsa?"

My son looked at him in disgust and snapped, "No. Salsa is spicy!"

We continued our meal while still giggling between bites. I watched as my son used his plate as an artist's palette and the ketchup as his paint, mixing red with all the available colors on his palette, instantly turning it into his canvas.

Biting his tongue as he concentrated on squirting out more ketchup from the ketchup bottle, he provided the family with valuable knowledge, announcing, "Ketchup is from tomatoes, tomatoes are fruits, and fruits are healthy." He placed the ketchup bottle down, looked up, and said, "And it tastes great on *everything!*"

It was then that I realized what I had been missing. My son was exploring flavors, textures, and combinations. He was being creative and learning about food in his own way. I had been so busy trying to control his eating habits that I had missed the joy he was taking in the experience.

I wanted my ketchup-loving son to appreciate different flavors and experience them without relying on a condiment to mask them while also understanding that food should be

enjoyed, not just consumed. The thought of having him experience his food without ketchup would be amazing.

With my fork, I scooped up a bite of macaroni and cheese and held it out in front of my son. "Please take a bite without ketchup," I begged.

Closing his eyes tight and opening his mouth wide, he leaned in as I moved the food into his mouth. He bit down, chewing it, as we all waited for a response.

"This is amazing, Momma!" he shrieked with excitement.

I admired his curiosity and willingness for trying something without ketchup. With a heart full of love and my eyes brimming with tears of joy, I smiled, knowing that I had found the perfect balance between allowing him to explore and teaching him the joy of discovering new flavors.

The ketchup bottle still sits on the dining table; however, it isn't used as much.