

A RAINBOW *of* RISKS



THE DARK SIDE *of* FOOD DYES

Shainy (Blau) Edelman, Crown Heights
Graduating class of 5760 (2000)

drove to East Flatbush to pick up my child from a playdate, expecting the usual routine: A quick exchange of thanks and a smooth ride home. But not this time. My sweet, soft-spoken nine-year-old stood rooted on the driveway, digging in his heels and refusing to get into the car. He demanded the car cool off first, listing grievances about the heat, the air conditioning vent, and even the seat's recline angle. This wasn't the child I knew.

Sure, it had been a long day, and yes, he was hot and possibly overstimulated, but what gave me pause was his inability to regulate his emotions. I knew something was off. I followed my instinct, leaned in, and asked gently, “Did you have something with food coloring?” Cue the guilty expression and a reluctant shrug: Endless cups of bright red punch at his friend’s house.

How did I know?

Like most parents, I started on my parenting journey thinking, “A little colorful treat now and then can’t hurt, right?” I didn’t want to overreact or risk possible consequences of restrictive behaviors around food. But when I found myself refereeing outsized meltdowns over daring to offer a child a pre-peeled orange, or over reminding another to remove his shoes before walking upstairs or inviting another sibling to join our fourth Rummikub round, it became impossible to ignore. Something was off, and I had to dig deeper.

Enter my six older sisters—a gift I’ve only truly come to appreciate in adulthood. Now, they’re my hotline for wisdom and practical advice. One sister is my go-to for philosophical dilemmas; another is my guide for *hash-kafic* clarity on parenting; and a third is like Google in human form, except better because she texts back instantly.

It was Rochie, our family health guru, who sent me the TED Talk link that changed everything. Her message read: “*You won’t need more convincing after this.*” And, as usual, she was right.

It was a turning point for me listening intently to Dr. Rebecca Bevens, a cognitive neuroscience professor and child development researcher, as she shared her personal story. Like so many parents, she faced the heartbreaking struggle of watching her son suffer from unexplained emotional meltdowns, low energy, troubling psychological distress, and mysterious “buzzing” in his brain. Despite her expertise, Dr. Bevens felt stumped and helpless. She turned to research, textbooks, articles, and the internet, uncovering shocking evidence of food dyes causing profound emotional disruptions in children.

“Artificial food dyes are in many of the processed foods we eat,” Dr. Bevens explained. “They are manmade, petroleum-based, and banned in many countries. They provide no nutritional value, and many have been linked to cancer.” Over the years, research has shown a growing link between these artificial colors and serious cognitive and behavioral challenges in children, such as ADHD, aggression and restlessness.

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On a personal level, what Dr. Bevens discovered after eliminating food coloring from her child’s diet was both staggering and inspiring. Within days, her son’s emotional fits stopped entirely. Over the months that followed, his health rebounded dramatically. He gained sixteen pounds after previously experiencing metabolic disruptions that kept him underweight for much of his life—a profound reminder that what we put into our bodies matters.

Brightly colored candies, cakes, drinks, and even snacks seem to be everywhere, especially in products marketed toward children. On the surface, these hues may seem harmless—fun, eye-catching, and an easy way to add extra excitement to a long school day. But the consequences are real: food dyes are affecting our kids in ways we often overlook.

According to the National Institutes of Health, both human clinical trials and animal studies have shown that synthetic food dyes can have significant behavioral effects, particularly in children. Research links food dyes to issues like allergies, hyperactivity, learning struggles, and even irritability and aggression. It’s startling how much these additives can impact mood and behavior—think attention problems, restlessness,



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fidgeting, impulsiveness, and even emotional roller-coasters like anxiety or mood swings. Some kids experience migraines, trouble concentrating, or a noticeable drop in word retrieval skills.

For many parents, this isn't news; they've seen it firsthand. Within minutes of their child eating something brightly colored, the meltdowns and erratic behavior begin. Depending on the dye, the effects can last for hours—or even days. Green 3 and Blue 1 can linger for a day, Red 40 for one to two days, and Yellow 5 and 6 can affect kids for up to five days.

My friend Esti shared a concerning experience: “My two-year old son had night terrors for months. We tried different doctors and alternative treatments, but nothing helped—we were left with more questions than answers. “Then, over Pesach, the night terrors suddenly stopped. It gave us pause. We still had gluten (matzah), sugar, and milk, but no other processed foods. What could have made the difference?”

Determined to figure it out, Esti began searching for answers and connecting the dots. “I concluded the likely culprit was food coloring. After cutting it from his diet, the nightmares stopped. On Shavuot, we confirmed this correlation: after he had a lollipop in shul, the screaming returned. Months later, it happened again. I retraced everything he had eaten in those last twenty-four hours and discovered there was food dye in a bag of chips he had snacked on. Seeing these patterns made me think: Are these treats worth it? We want our kids to be calm and focused, but when we give our children snacks with artificial food dyes, it can unintentionally sabotage our efforts.”

As parents, we're always striving to do what's best for our children, seeking ways to support their well-being and help them thrive. As a result, many of us are paying closer attention to the foods we provide. Even psychotherapists are recognizing this connection. Rus

Devorah Wallin, an integrative mental health professional, trains therapists annually in her workshop “The Food-Mood Connection.” “There's a bidirectional relationship between our mind and our gut,” she explains, “and what we eat affects how we feel and think.” She adds, “Instead of a whack-a-mole approach to addressing symptoms, let's look at the underlying root causes that might be affecting our children.”

Truthfully, we need not look further than the wisdom of the Rambam, the greatest physician of all time, who profoundly stated: “No disease that can be treated by diet should be treated with any other means.” This timeless insight aligns with today's 21st-century functional medicine approach, which emphasizes addressing the root causes of health concerns rather than relying solely on symptomatic treatments. It's fascinating to see how this ancient wisdom continues to echo in modern practices, reinforcing the undeniable connection between what we consume and how we function—both physically and emotionally.

The Ted Talk was a wake-up call, and that night, I hit the pantry. Those perfectly colored pickles? Yellow 6. The chocolate pudding that holds the secret to my winning babka filling? Red 40. The lemonade packets I would sometimes add to my husband's lunchbox? Yellow 5. The raspberry hamantash filling? Red 40. The white softsoap that we use unassumingly? More

Watching me toss the “treats” into the garbage drove the point home—they learned that chemicals don't belong in their bodies, or anyone else's (no, we won't be giving these away).

chemical coloring than you would ever guess. I almost skipped over the chips drawer thinking those were surely safe, but a quick glance told me otherwise: Red chemicals in barbecue corn chips and all hues of yellow dyes in the not-so-innocent onion rings and honey potato chips.

The fridge holds its share of surprises, too. Synthetic dyes are lurking in everyday items like the yogurts you thought were healthy, the pink antibiotics promising to restore health, the orange children's Motrin,

and even in smoked salmon and salad dressings.

Reading labels instantly became second nature in our home, empowering us as parents to make healthier choices for our family. Small changes—like swapping out a popular snack for a dye-free version—led to undeniable improvements in my children’s health and behavior.

My kids quickly caught on. From as young as four, I taught them to scan labels for numbers like Blue 1, Red 40, and Yellow 6. To encourage this habit, I promised that anything they brought home with food dye could be traded for a better reward: A chocolate, a chemical-free equivalent, a prize or even money. Watching me toss the “treats” into the garbage drove the point home—they learned that chemicals don’t belong in their bodies, or anyone else’s (no, we won’t be giving these away).

When they occasionally slipped and had something at school, I would gently make them aware of the link between how they were feeling and the chemicals in their system (and on the colorful tongue that gave them away). It’s intuitive to them now, and despite occasional temptation (hey, they’re still kids), they understand how harmful food dye is and recognize how it makes them feel.

Change takes time, and it’s understandable that not all environments, like schools, will become dye-free zones overnight. To make things easier for my kids, I send chemical-free replacements to my children’s teachers so that they have alternatives when food dye is being given out. Some rebbeim were eager to learn more and set classroom food-dye policies while allowing me to swap out their Laffy Taffy stash for stickers and other prizes.

While systemic change remains a goal, I’ve also asked parents to be mindful of what they include in *arein-firnish peklach*, birthday bags, *siyum* treats and the like. My hope (and my yearly appeal) is that one day schools will stop serving food dyes altogether, recognizing that it benefits parents and teachers alike and it is not just a personal preference, but a concern that impacts the well-being and success of all students.

In 1997, Barbara Reed Stitt, author of *Food and Behavior: A Natural Connection*, implemented a whole-foods program for an entire school district of fifteen-thousand students. The program eliminated sugar, junk food, and soda, replacing them with water and whole foods. The results were dramatic: Mood, behavior, and academic performance significantly improved. High school dropout rates dropped to just sixteen students

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Artificial colors disrupted their ability to sit still and concentrate, often with immediate effects.

per year—a staggering difference compared to the four-hundred and fifty students who dropped out annually before the program. While this was only a temporary study, its success speaks volumes.

Mrs. Rochie Sandhaus, elementary school principal at Bais Chaya Mushka, witnessed results that clearly demonstrate the impact of synthetic dyes. “At Bais Chaya Mushka, we made the decision two years ago to remove all candy and soda from the school,” Mrs. Sandhaus shares, “allowing only organic treats like lollipops once a month. Teachers are still permitted to use organic treats as rewards. This change came after we witnessed the effects artificial dyes had on some of our students. For certain children—particularly those who already face challenges with focus or are sensitive to chemicals—the impact was undeniable. Artificial colors disrupted their ability to sit still and concentrate, often with immediate effects.

“Initially we removed candy as a *kriah* incentive and we witnessed immediate and clear impact in behavior. We therefore saw banning food coloring as a crucial step toward creating a school environment that truly prioritizes our children’s well-being. Creating a space where children can learn and thrive required us to take a firm stand on eliminating artificial dyes.

“It wasn’t easy at first—we had to find alternatives for the rewards teachers used, and students initially struggled with the no-candy policy. Over time, while some students still found it challenging, everyone eventually adapted, and the results have been undeniable. The extraordinary improvement in our students’ ability to stay calm, focus, regulate their behavior, and engage in the classroom continues to be both noticeable and profoundly rewarding.”

It’s encouraging to see that families and some schools aren’t the only ones waking up to the dangers of artificial dyes. Across the U.S., legislative action is gaining momentum. California has already taken steps to ban certain dyes and additives, and nine other states—including Illinois, New York, and Washington—are considering similar legislation. This growing aware-

CHEWYS
OK



FRUIT
BITES
OK



FRUIT
STICKS
OK



TAFFY
CHOF K



JELLY FISH
& SOUR GUMMIES
SCROLL K

ness gives me hope that meaningful change is on the horizon as the broader public and policymakers recognize that food dye is not merely the concern of “crunchy granola” parents.

While we wait for broader legislative change, there’s plenty we can do as parents to make a difference now. When preparing birthday bags or snacks for school, let’s think about what we’re really serving children. (Ever wonder why we need to sign permission slips before Tylenol is administered, yet no one asks for consent when it comes to feeding them petroleum-based food dyes?) Choosing chemical-free treats is an easy way to make sure we’re being kind to all kids—not just our own. Let’s keep it simple and healthy—no permission slip required!

At home, look at the products you use regularly—maybe a snack, a cereal, a yogurt, or even a toothpaste—and check the label. If it contains artificial dyes, replace it with a dye-free alternative. These small steps might seem insignificant, but they add up quickly. You’ll be amazed at the difference you can make, not just for your child, but for your entire family.

As parents, we know that a child’s emotional and mental state is shaped by so many factors—stress, environment, relationships, and yes, even the food they eat. For some children, eliminating food dyes can lead to transformative changes, offering a surprising and welcome improvement in behavioral issues, including reduced symptoms of ADHD. For those whose symptoms aren’t immediately resolved by eliminating food dyes, it’s still a meaningful step forward because it clears away one potential trigger, allowing us to explore other possible causes without chemicals clouding the picture.

For me, this journey has been about more than just removing artificial dyes—it’s been about reclaiming health on all levels: mental, emotional, and physical. It’s about showing my children that we can make choices to protect and nurture ourselves. It’s about observing the correlation between our actions and how the brain and body react. And it’s about balance—honoring the joy of treats while prioritizing our well-being.

While we wait for systemic change, the power, until then, is in our hands. We have the power to shape our children’s health today. Together, we can create a community where artificial dyes no longer pose dangers to our children’s health and happiness. A community where kids can grow, thrive, and succeed, free from the silent disruptions caused by these chemicals. The power to make that change starts with us—one intentional step at a time. ■



FRUIT
BARS
OU

CHOCOLATE
SCROLL K



SUN-
BUTTER
CUPS STAR K

OAT CHOCOLATE
BARS
OU



SPRINKLES
OK

COLOR
OK

