Episode Book

EPISODE #5919

Why Your Toddler Dunks Crackers in Water

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SYNOPSIS

A fifteen-month-old drops a cracker into his water cup, stirs it, drinks the cloudy water, then eats the cracker. His parents call it raccoon behavior. Pediatric feeding specialists at Solid Starts call it normal exploration — and the research suggests they're right. This episode digs into what's actually driving the behavior: why teething turns out to be the weakest explanation, how the Infant and Toddler Sensory Profile explains why some toddlers mix and pour while others couldn't care less, and what Piaget's tertiary circular reactions tell us about a kid who isn't eating so much as running a procedure. We also look at the exposure research — ten tastings, a seven-week intervention, intake up hundreds of percent — and ask whether the mess at the dinner table might be doing developmental work that's hard to replicate any other way.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Fifteen months old, sitting at the table, and he has just dropped an entire cracker into his water cup. Not dropped. Placed. Then he stirs it with his fist, watches it go cloudy, drinks the water, eats the cracker.



Herman

And the parents are calling it raccoon behavior.



Corn

Hannah sent us this one. She wants to know whether this is normal toddler development or just Ezra, because apparently nobody in that house can eat a meal in peace anymore. Daniel's parents have already named it. She says if he's got a sippy cup he'll sprinkle water all over his food too, so it's not just the cup.



Herman

Both directions. Liquid into solid, solid into liquid.



Corn

And the question underneath it: is he intuitively softening his food for his gums, is this sensory exploration, is he experimenting with cause and effect, and why are some babies so drawn to mixing and pouring while others couldn't care less.



Herman

He's also asking if his son is a raccoon.



Corn

That's the part we can answer fastest.



Herman

So let's find out whether Ezra is a raccoon, a scientist, or just a toddler doing exactly what toddlers do.



Corn

I'll tell you where this lands before we spend twenty minutes getting there, because the verdict isn't in dispute. This is documented behavior. Pediatric feeding specialists at Solid Starts have a whole entry filed under baby putting food in cup, splashing, and their framing is that it's a normal form of exploration for babies and toddlers, and it's good for them to explore different textures. That's not a parent forum rationalizing. That's the people who do this for a living.



Herman

And the age window tightens it further. This clusters between twelve and twenty-four months and it's generally described as a phase kids grow out of. Ezra at fifteen months is dead center. He's not early, he's not late, he's not unusual.



Corn

Parents have been comparing their kids to raccoons for a very long time, it turns out. There's a thread on BabyCenter that's been sitting there since January of 2009, parents of sixteen-month-olds, twenty-one-month-olds, two-year-olds all describing the same thing. One mother wrote that she wondered if her son was part raccoon, then admitted it grossed her out and she didn't make a big deal of it in front of him because she was just happy he ate well. Another one closed it out with two words. It was a phase.



Herman

Two words that carry a lot of weight when you're the one wiping the table.



Corn

So the verdict is in. It's normal. But the interesting question is why, and the first explanation most parents reach for is the one the evidence is weakest on.



Herman

Teething. And I want to be fair to it, because on its face it's a good hypothesis. Swollen, tender gums make chewing uncomfortable. That's not folk wisdom, that's the standard guidance. Soft foods, cold foods, that's what you're told to offer a teething baby because hard textures hurt.



Corn

So the logic runs: the kid bites a hard cracker, it hurts, he notices the cracker gets soft in the water, and he starts soaking everything before he eats it.



Herman

That's the story. It's plausible, it's intuitive, and the data doesn't back it as the main driver. There's a feasibility study out of the Journal of Texture Studies, ninety-seven children, looking at chewing performance. And the headline finding was exactly what you'd expect in one direction: chewing ability increases with age. Older kids chew better. Fine.



Corn

And the part nobody expects.



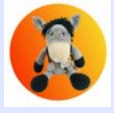
Herman

The association with teeth emergence was not significant. Chewing skill tracked age, not tooth eruption. Kids got better at chewing on a schedule that had nothing to do with which teeth had come through.



Corn

So the teeth aren't the thing teaching him to chew.



Herman

Which doesn't mean teething is irrelevant. I want to be precise here. A kid with sore gums does find soft food easier, that part is real. But there's no source anywhere stating that toddlers soak food specifically to ease teething pain. Nobody has documented that. The



Herman (continued)

teething explanation is a reasonable parent intuition that the literature simply doesn't support as the engine.



Corn

It's the story you tell because it's flattering. It makes the behavior purposeful.



Herman

It makes him a little problem-solver. And he might be. But that's not what's happening at fifteen months.



Corn

So if it's not the gums, what is it?



Herman

Texture. Solid Starts frames it as exploration before anything else, and that matches the wider early-childhood literature, where mixing food and water is treated as classic sensory play. There's a curriculum out of Purdue, the ELM curriculum, that builds whole activity blocks for twelve to twenty-four-month-olds around filling, pouring, and noticing what water does. They describe toddlers stepping in puddles and watching the water move. That's the same kid. The water is the material and the food is the material and he's finding out what each one does to the other.



Corn

Which raises the obvious question. If this is normal, why is Ezra doing it and the kid at the next table isn't?



Herman

That's the sensory profile. Toddlers vary, measurably, in how much sensation they seek. The Infant and Toddler Sensory Profile scores sensation seeking as its own quadrant, separate from the kid who covers his ears when the blender runs. Some toddlers want



Herman (continued)

more input, more texture, more mess, more of everything on their hands.



Corn

So it's a trait. Not a quirk, not a phase he invented, a temperament difference you could in principle score on a form.



Herman

And that's the best-supported answer to Daniel's question about why some babies and not others. It isn't that Ezra's more curious or more badly behaved. He's wired to reach for the input.



Corn

Herman, you spent years doing pediatrics. Does that match what you saw?



Herman

It does, and it's the thing that used to frustrate parents most, because there's no lever. You can't teach a sensation-seeking kid to stop seeking sensation. You can only decide where he's allowed to do it.



Corn

Which is exactly what the feeding people say. Don't suppress the impulse, redirect it. Give him a bucket, give him the bath, let him pour water somewhere that isn't the dinner table.



Herman

That's their practical advice almost word for word. Offer the play away from the table. Put cups and squishy toys in a bucket of water, or do it in the bathtub.



Corn

Because the impulse is going to find an outlet either way.



Herman

Right, and if you make the table a battleground you've picked a fight you can't win. You're not competing with a developmental drive, you're competing with his nervous system.



Corn

So the teething story is the one parents tell, and the sensory exploration story is the one the evidence actually supports.



Herman

That's where I'd land. It's a texture thing, and it's a temperament thing, and the teething part is a side effect nobody's demonstrated.



Corn

There's a detail I like here. If you watch him do it, the order matters to him. The cracker goes in, then he watches it. Then he stirs. Then he drinks.



Herman

He's not eating. He's running a procedure.



Corn

The drinking is the part that gets me. He drinks the cloudy water. That's not a kid trying to get calories.



Herman

That's the tell that it isn't about food at all. He's interested in the water. The cracker is an ingredient in a project about water.



Corn

So if it's not mainly teething, and it's not just texture, what's actually going on in that little head? That's where Piaget comes in.



Herman

Piaget's sensorimotor stage runs from birth to about two years, and the whole organizing principle is that the baby learns through senses and motor action. The core achievement you're looking for is causality, the moment the infant understands that his own actions produce specific outcomes.



Corn

Which is why they splash bathwater and throw spoons off the high chair over and over.



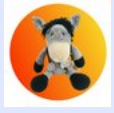
Herman

They're building the model. My arm moves, the water goes up, the water comes down, adults make a noise. Same action, same result, every time. That repetition is the point.



Corn

And at fifteen months specifically?



Herman

He's right at the transition into what Piaget called tertiary circular reactions, twelve to eighteen months. And this substage is defined by deliberate experimentation. Not just repeating an action, but varying it to see what changes.



Corn

So the first cracker going in is one thing. By the fifth cracker he's testing something.



Herman

He's testing what happens if it goes in whole, what happens if he breaks it, what happens if he stirs first, what happens if he uses the sippy cup and sprays the food instead of dunking it. What if I put this in the water. That is literally the textbook description of the substage. Daniel's son is doing the assigned reading.



Corn

The mess on the table is cognition made visible.



Herman

That's the reframe I'd want a parent to take away. It isn't misbehavior. It's the outward sign of a cognitive milestone. He's not failing to eat properly, he's succeeding at something else entirely.



Corn

And the sensory thing and the cause-and-effect thing aren't rivals. They're the same afternoon.



Herman

They're layered. The texture is the input, the experiment is what he does with it. He's using his hands to ask a question.



Corn

And that gets us to the second half of Hannah's question. Why some babies more than others. You mentioned temperament. There's another factor, isn't there.



Herman

Early experience, and this is where the numbers get interesting. Because food play isn't just a phase you tolerate, it appears to be doing developmental work.



Corn

Explain.



Herman

Repeated exposure is one of the most reliable findings in the whole field. Tasting a food eight to ten or more separate times increases a toddler's acceptance of it. That's the threshold people keep landing on.



Corn

Eight to ten times is a lot of exposures.



Herman

It is, and that's why parents give up at three. There's a study in the Journal of Nutrition, ten exposures to a novel vegetable, and intake went up sixty-three percent and liking went up twenty-one percent. Same vegetable, same kid, just repeated.



Corn

So the tenth time isn't the same as the first.



Herman

And there's a longer one. A seven-week exposure intervention, and intake of a vegetable crisp went up by roughly three hundred percent. About eight grams.



Corn

Three hundred percent from a seven-week program.



Herman

And it held at six months. They checked back and the effect was still there. That's not a kid being tricked into eating broccoli once, that's a preference that got built.



Corn

So what does that have to do with water and crackers?



Herman

Everything, if the mechanism is familiarity through hands-on contact. Reviews of this literature keep finding that familiarization through play, through cooking, through tasting lessons, does the same work as repeated tasting. Handling a food, squishing it, watching what it does in water, that's contact. That's exposure.



Corn

So the kid making soup may be building his palate while he does it.



Herman

He's getting more information about the food than the kid who just eats it. What it feels like dry, what it feels like wet, what it smells like, how it changes. That's not wasted time. That's a kid running extra trials.



Corn

Which reframes the whole table situation. You're not watching a mess, you're watching tuition.



Herman

And it means the thing you're tempted to stop is the thing doing the work. Which is why the advice is redirect rather than forbid.



Corn

Now, the parents and the specialists are not saying the same thing here, and that gap is worth naming. There's a thread from 2009 where the mother says it grosses her out, and she's not alone in that. Parents call it gross and they try to stop it.



Herman

And the practitioner line is the opposite. It's normal, it's useful, move it to the bath. One parent in that same thread put it best in a single line. I just think they are discovering new things and trying things out to see how they would taste.



Corn

That parent had arrived at the developmental answer without reading a single paper.



Herman

Parents get there eventually. The problem is what they do in the meantime, which is usually try to shut it down, and then they've removed the experiment without replacing it.



Corn

And the specialists are clear that this isn't a red flag. The cup-drinking concerns they actually list are different things. Persistent coughing when drinking, wet vocal noises, no cup progress past fifteen months. Food in water isn't on the list.



Herman

Which matters for Hannah and Daniel, because the thing they're describing is not the thing to worry about.



Corn

I want to push on one part of this, Herman. If the behavior is doing all this work, if it's palate-building and experimentation and texture learning, why does it stop? Why is it a phase?



Herman

Because the questions get answered. Once you know what a cracker does in water, and you know it the tenth time as well as the first, the experiment stops being interesting. The novelty is what drives it. He's not going to spend his life doing this.



Corn

He'll find a new thing to ruin.



Herman

He will. And the parents will call that one something else.



Corn

There's a household angle I can't leave alone. We live with an infant. I have watched what a meal looks like when the person across from you has decided water is a construction material.



Herman

You've been very calm about it.



Corn

I eat leaves. Nobody at that table is in a position to judge anybody.



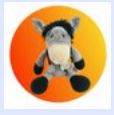
Herman

That's the most self-aware thing you've said this month.



Corn

I'm saying the cleanup is somebody else's problem and I've made my peace with that.



Herman

Corn, I'll be honest, I thought you were going to come in on the teething side. You usually take the folk explanation.



Corn

The folk explanation has a study of ninety-seven children against it. I'll take the data over the story.



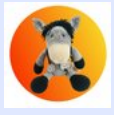
Herman

That's new.



Corn

It's not new. I've always been like this. You just don't notice when I agree with you.



Herman

I notice. I'm choosing to enjoy it.



Corn

So, back to the actual question. Is this more about cause and effect, or sensory exploration.



Herman

Both, and the honest answer is they're not separable at fifteen months. The sensory input is what gives him something to experiment with. The experimentation is what he does with the input. Piaget's stage is defined by learning through the senses, so the two halves of Hannah's question are the same half.



Corn

And the teething part?



Herman

Plausible, contributing, undemonstrated. If he's teething, soft food feels better, and that might make the behavior more appealing. But it isn't the engine and no one has shown it is.



Corn

Why are some babies drawn to mixing, soaking, pouring, combining?



Herman

The best-supported answer is a sensation-seeking temperament, which is measurable, plus however much food play they've been allowed to do, which feeds the exposure cycle and makes food more familiar and more interesting. Two inputs, both real, neither of them anything Ezra is doing wrong.



Corn

I'll take that. And I'll take the family's side of it, briefly. The raccoon name is affectionate.



Herman

It's a compliment, structurally.



Corn

It's what you call something when you've given up and decided to love it anyway.



Herman

That's a better summary than mine.



Corn

Somebody has been waiting to talk for twenty minutes, and it isn't either of us.



Hilbert

I use a Le Creuset, seven and a quarter quart, the round one, about four hundred dollars. Mine was a gift.



Hilbert

I've been listening to the two of you talk around the child for the whole show and you keep missing it. He's making soup. You said it yourselves and then you went off to Piaget. Soup is a form. Soup is the most forgiving form there is. You can put anything in a pot and if you get the order right it works. That's not a mess on a table, that's a first draft.



Corn

Daniel's son is not making soup.



Hilbert

He's making version one of soup. I've been making mine for eleven years. Current build is version forty-one.



Herman

Forty-one versions of the same soup?



Hilbert

Same soup. It's the layering principle. Everything goes in the pot in a fixed order and the order is decided by what the water remembers. Water holds onto what's been in it before. I can taste the difference between water that's had carrots through it and water that hasn't. Anybody can, it's just that nobody bothers to check.



Corn

How do you check?



Hilbert

You taste it.



Herman

And that's the version forty-one part.



Hilbert

Versions one through forty were all made in the same pot. I've never washed it. If you wash it you lose the memory. That's not sentiment, that's just how it works.



Corn

So the pot is carrying forty rounds of history.



Hilbert

Forty-one. The current one's still going.



Herman

Is the pot in good condition?



Hilbert

The pot is at my sister's house. It's been at my sister's house for eight months. I've asked for it eleven times. She says she's using it, and when I ask what for she changes the subject. I have a theory and I'd rather not say it out loud.



Corn

You'd rather not say it out loud.



Hilbert

It involves a slow cooker and a dish I have no interest in naming. It's an ongoing situation.



Herman

How has the soup survived eight months without the pot?



Hilbert

It hasn't. I've been stalled since February. I've got forty versions of thinking and no pot to run them in.



Corn

Hilbert, did you ever try to get it back with something other than asking?



Hilbert

I offered to buy her a different pot. She took the pot, not the offer. So I know what's happening over there.



Herman

How big is the difference between water that's had carrots in it and water that hasn't?



Hilbert

Enough that a neighbor asked me to make the soup for a wedding. I said no, on principle. Weddings are not the venue for a soup of that magnitude. That's a bowl at a table with someone you like, not a tent with two hundred people in it.



Herman

You turned down a wedding.



Hilbert

I turned down what would have happened to the soup at a wedding. There's a difference.



Corn

Did he ask again?



Hilbert

He asked three times. I gave him a different soup the third time. He hasn't asked since.



Herman

The pot is the bottleneck.



Hilbert

The pot has always been the bottleneck. It's a fifteen-month-old with a cracker and a cup. He's got the pot and he's got the memory and he hasn't washed it either. I'd leave him alone.



Corn

I think this is the most supportive thing he's ever said about a child.



Herman

It's the most he's ever said about a pot.



Corn

Now, there's no study on this next part, and I want to say that once and then reason it out, because it's the honest place to stand. Nobody has published a paper on toddlers putting food in water. It's not a phenomenon anyone has made a career of. It's handled by practitioners and parents, and the adjacent research is what we've got.



Herman

Texture acceptance, masticatory development, sensory processing. Those three bodies of work are the closest anyone has come.



Corn

What you do with a topic like that is reason from what's known, and what's known points one direction. The behavior is normal. It's multiply driven. The worst-supported explanation is the practical one.



Herman

Teething.



Corn

The best-supported explanation is the least intentional one. He's not solving a problem, he's collecting information.



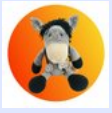
Herman

The behavior is a phase. The drive underneath it isn't. The same drive is what makes repeated exposure work, and repeated exposure is the thing that builds a palate, so the mess and the mechanism are the same thing.



Corn

Which is the line I'd leave a parent with. You're not going to make the soup stop. You're going to decide where it's allowed.



Herman

By the time you've decided, he'll have moved on to something else.



Corn

Which is what the parent in that thread said. It was a phase.



Herman

She was right, and she didn't need the journals to see it.



Corn

Here's where I've landed. The most common wrong belief about this is that teething is the reason.



Herman

The correction is short. Chewing performance tracks age, not tooth emergence. That study of ninety-seven children found no significant association. Soft food feels good on sore gums, sure, but nobody has ever shown a toddler soaking a cracker to get there.



Corn

He's not softening his food. He's investigating it.



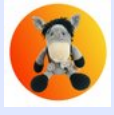
Herman

The second wrong belief, the one underneath it, is that this needs fixing. It doesn't. Feeding specialists redirect the impulse, they don't shut it down, and they're right. A bucket of water and a handful of cups does the same work without the table getting involved.



Corn

Ezra isn't a raccoon.



Herman

He's a fifteen-month-old running a series of experiments on the properties of water and crackers.



Corn

The results, by his own assessment, are delicious.



Herman

One forward-looking thing, and it comes from the pot. Hilbert's been sitting on a version of this for eight months because the vessel isn't where it should be.



Corn

Careful.



Herman

No, it's a real thought. The experiment needs somewhere to happen. That's all Ezra's got going for him. He's got a cup and a table and nobody has moved the venue yet.



Corn

That's a better ending than I had.



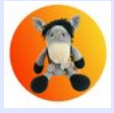
Herman

I've been saving it.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who is still owed a pot.



Herman

For more along these lines, there's episode four ninety-eight, The Science of Seven Months; episode seven, Building Custom ASR Tools; and episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To. This has been My Weird Prompts. If the show does



Herman (continued)

anything for you, leave us a review wherever you're listening. It helps people find it.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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