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By Jodi Kantor

Memo to Nanny: No Juice Boxes

In posting after posting on the new Web site ISawYourNanny.blogspot.com, anonymous whistle-blowers describe alarming baby-sitting behavior they witness at playgrounds or supermarkets: the nanny in the Seattle suburbs who may be drinking on the job; the sitter in Greenwich, Conn., preparing for a date with the children's father; the one near Atlanta pouring Dr Pepper into the sippy cup of her young charge.

Alcohol abuse. Adultery. Carbonated beverages?

One of these things is not like the others. But in an age of organic everything, rampant childhood obesity and widespread food allergies — not to mention poisonous spinach — the feeding and misfeeding of children has become a tense, awkward point of debate between parents and baby sitters.

Just a few years ago, giving lunch to a 1-year-old was a simple matter of popping open a jar of the Gerber mush du jour. But many parents now feed their children with the precision of chemists and the passion of Alice Waters, and expect sitters to do the same. Fruit juice, once a childhood mainstay, is now considered a sweet slosh of empty calories, and soft drinks are a potential firing offense.

“Twenty years ago you would feed kids anything,” said Marci Thomas, who has been baby-sitting for New York children for that long. “Just feed the child hamburgers, and that was great back then. Now it's so precise. Don't give them that at lunch, make sure she eats that at dinner.”

The issue is a trying one even for those gifted in the delicate art of parent-nanny diplomacy. The conflicts are partly a result of the educational and economic divide that leaves many nannies less knowledgeable (or neurotic, take your pick) about nutrition than their employers. But it is also partly a struggle over the emotional issues involved in leaving a child in another person's care.

The result is a state of affairs in which nannies innocently serve children Yoo-hoo, believing that it is simply chocolate milk, or defy parents by sneaking their charges forbidden candy bars or simply notice that a child's dinner costs more than their hourly rate.

Many parents, meanwhile, now ask sitters to document their children's every bite in feeding logs, and fumble over how to tell an otherwise beloved nanny that the pizza bagels and chicken nuggets she has been serving to several generations of children — including her own — are unacceptable.

“It's not unusual for parents to make a huge list of what is and isn't allowed,” said Genevieve Thiers, who is the founder and chief executive of Sittercity.com, which matches more than 150,000 baby sitters with parents. Her site receives so many queries about food, she said, that she is preparing to post an online worksheet on which parents can specify diet preferences.

“I've seen parents list calorie counts, lists of ingredients in foods that kids are and aren't allowed to have,” she said. “They'll name an enzyme or a sugar.”

Nannies, meanwhile, find it demeaning “when parents are overly scrupulous,” said Julia Wrigley, a professor of sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, because they are implying that the sitters do not know or care enough to feed children properly. “The deeper emotional issue is how much judgment and authority the caregiver can exercise,” she said.

Sitters can hear a parent's dietary requests as criticism of her education level, cultural traditions and personal eating habits, and as harbingers of extra work.

“You have to prepare the meal from scratch,” said one older nanny who complained bitterly as she pushed a little boy on a swing set in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and then asked not to be identified for fear of losing her job. “It's organic organic all the way, but even the YoBaby yogurt has too much sugar,” she said, referring to Stonyfield Farm's organic line for babies. “You have to get special organic produce and then prepare each meal.” Nannies, she said, must now be personal chefs while also supervising mischievous toddlers, and all without an increase in pay.

Strict parental guidelines may leave a nanny in a difficult position: If a 3-year-old refuses any lunch other than pizza, is the sitter supposed to let the child go hungry? And what's a nanny to do when even the parents have a hard time getting a child to eat his peas?

Most of the sitters interviewed for this article said they are happy to try to feed children whatever their employers specify. In contrast, parents expressed a great deal of anxiety, saying they feel guilty criticizing their nannies and even guiltier about leaving their child at home eating potato chips.

Melani Cammett is a mother of two, an assistant professor of political science at Brown, and an accomplished Happy Meal thief. Her sitter, Lena Barros Mackie, has friends and relatives who work at fast-food chains and gave her children's meals to take to work, much to the delight of Ms. Cammett's children. So Ms. Cammett snatched the boxes, “stealing the candy and editing the contents,” she said, before returning the meals to the unsuspecting children.

Then she would feel awful. Ms. Mackie “is a generous and warm person, and I didn’t want to insult her,” Ms. Cammett said. “I feel uncomfortable about the whole thing of having a nanny and housekeeper as it is, so I was very uncomfortable about the class issues wrapped up around nutrition education. Not everyone can afford to buy organic stuff, especially the meats and the milks.”

When Ms. Cammett put Ms. Mackie on a full-time schedule, she sat her down for a gentle talk, and the fast-food surprises ended.

To up the emotional ante, the current nutritional wisdom says that what children eat may set their tastes in place permanently. In this view, a hot dog is never just a single tube of meat, because it will lead to thousands of salty, processed, who-knows-what-filled lunches to come.

Jennifer Tabet Shea, a mother on Cape Cod who once found a baby sitter giving French fries to her son, then 8 months old, said, “Since he is only a toddler, and we are 100 percent responsible for his food choices, why on earth would we choose food that is terrible for him and will set him up for a preference for ultrasweet, ultrafatty tastes for life?”

Ms. Shea now chooses her baby sitters in part based on their adherence to her rules, which include no high fructose corn syrup or hydrogenated oils, and limited refined sugars. This sort of approach is a radical break with a longstanding rule of childhood, namely that sweets are the payment a child receives to compensate for the absence of mom and dad.

Many baby sitters simply assume that rule is still in place. Janet Dracksdorf, an educational publisher in Boston, said that a sitter she employed had been taking her daughter — a toddler at the time — on regular candy runs. Ms. Dracksdorf did not learn about them until “two years later, when my daughter was articulate enough to talk about it,” she said.

“Maybe I should have suspected something when the baby sitter gave my daughter the Candy Land game for a third-birthday present,” Ms. Dracksdorf said. Her current nanny has a degree in nutrition.

What bothered Ms. Dracksdorf more than the sugar and fat was the revelation that her trusted sitter saw nothing wrong with feeding a 2-year-old chocolate and never thought to clear it with her. It was a glimpse into the secret world of what nannies and children do while parents are away, and it underscored the fact that Ms. Dracksdorf works rather than staying home with her child.

“You don’t want the child to eat differently because you’re gone,” said Rima D. Apple, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the author of “Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America” (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

Sometimes that is true even for parents who stock their pantry with Count Chocula and Pop-Tarts.

Samantha Treworgy, a nanny in Chicago, just started a job with children who “are allowed to eat chocolate and ice cream for snack, hot dogs for dinner, and then double dessert if they want.” They told their parents that Ms. Treworgy was “starving them” when she put away the ice cream.

“It’s been really awkward,” she said. “I feel like the bad guy.” She buys fruit and vegetables for the house, sometimes at her own expense.

Nicole Perez recently baby-sat for a 4-year-old boy in Boca Raton, Fla., who requested waffles and Oreos for dinner. “Obviously, I did not oblige his requests, despite his tantrums,” she said, explaining that she considered providing a healthy dinner part of her job.

The result? “I was asked not to come back,” Ms. Perez said.