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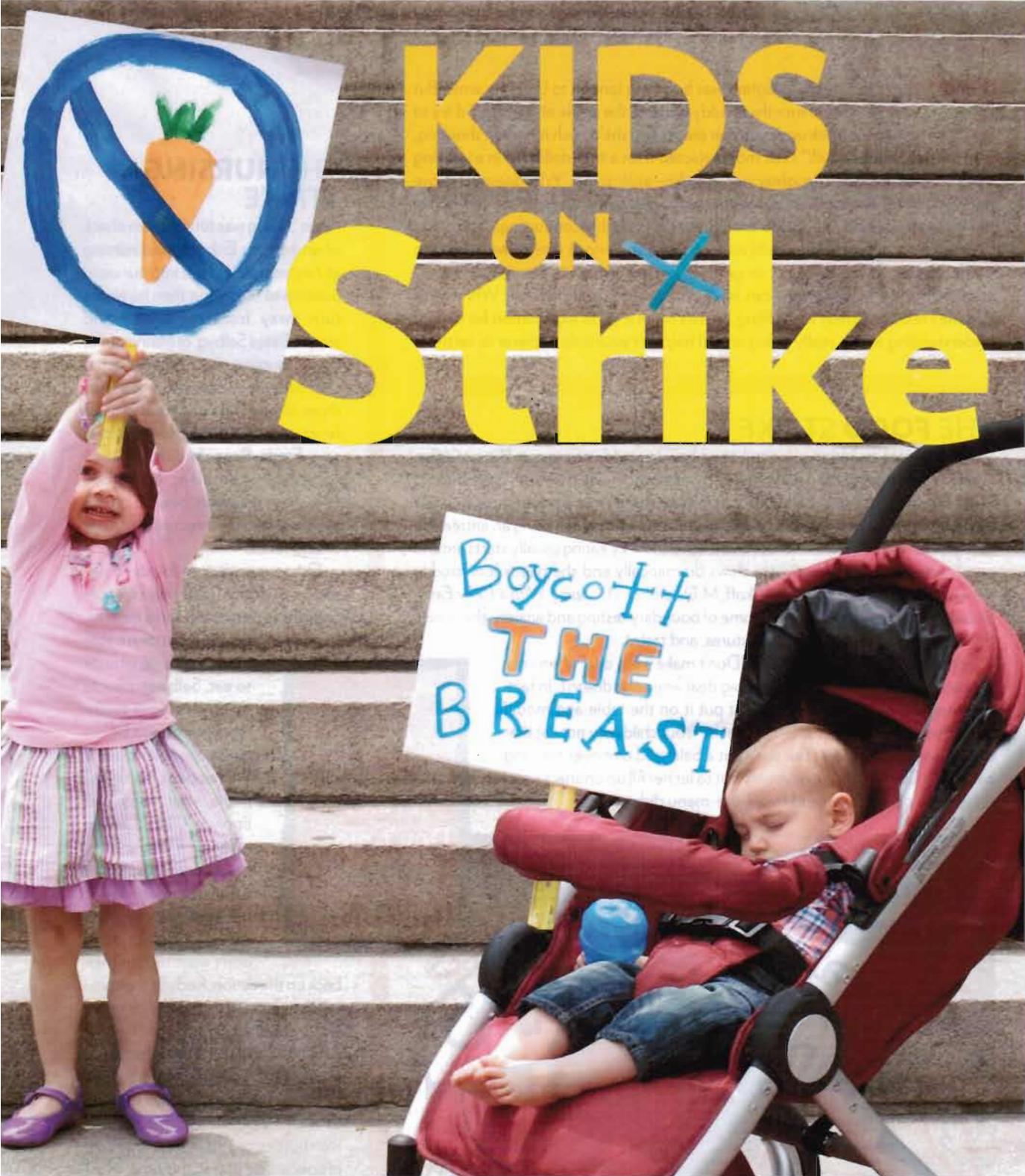
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# KIDS ON ~~X~~ Strike

Boycott  
**THE**  
BREAST

If your child is suddenly refusing to eat, sleep, or even poop, don't fret. You can handle these and other common protests—and win.

BY NICOLE CACCAVO KEAR • PHOTOGRAPHS BY BROOKE SLEZAK

**F**rom the time my daughter was born, she longed to be in my arms. But when she hit 18 months, Daddy became the apple of her eye. I'd try to read her a book or change her diaper and she'd push me away, shrieking, "Daaaaaaddy!!!" I felt more rejected than a torn dollar bill in a vending machine. My daughter was on strike—against me. "Why doesn't she love me?" I'd ask my husband. "She does. It's just a phase," he'd assure me. And while the rationale seemed reasonable enough, it wasn't terribly comforting.

Even the most compliant child may go through periods where she refuses to do things like eating, sleeping, or getting dressed. Strikes in young kids usually start with little warning and can have surprising staying power. While your sweetie's resistance may be baffling, there's often a good explanation for it—and understanding what's really going on will help get your little picketer to settle.

## THE FOOD STRIKE

When it comes to eating, no one knows how to wield veto power like a toddler. "When my son was 2, he simply decided not to eat meals anymore," says Bridget Palitz, a mother of two in San Diego. "If it was a snack food, a side dish, or a condiment, he could be persuaded, but forget about anything resembling an entrée. He actually survived on milk, ketchup, and crackers." Picky eating usually starts around age 1, when a child's growth rate slows dramatically and she needs less food in general, says pediatrician Will Wilkoff, M.D., author of *Coping With a Picky Eater*. Between 1 and 2 years old is also a time of boundary testing and anxiety about new things, including people, smells, textures, and tastes.

Forget about threats and bribes. Don't make a big deal when your kid eats her peas, and don't make a big deal when she doesn't. In fact, don't talk about the food at all—just put it on the table and model nutritious eating yourself at family meals. "Your child may not eat that day or even the next day, but she'll eat a balanced diet over the long haul," says Dr. Wilkoff. However, try not to let her fill up on snacks and drinks, and don't cave in and fix off-the-menu dishes.



## THE NURSING STRIKE

Anne Selbyg was totally taken aback when her son Erik stopped nursing at 7 months. "He'd get into our usual position to nurse, but then he would turn away from my breast and scream," says Selbyg, of Minneapolis. If your nursing pro suddenly balks, stay calm. If it lasts for more than three or four days and he also has a fever, take him to the pediatrician, says Freda Rosenfeld, a lactation consultant in Brooklyn, New York, to rule out common medical causes such as an ear infection, thrush, or acid reflux.

Otherwise, it's time for some detective work. For many babies, especially those between 5 and 8 months, teething can cause sore gums and a reluctance to eat. Selbyg suspects that her son was teething, since he also bit her nipple (another clue). If this happens, calmly remove your baby and firmly say, "No." Let him gnaw on a teething toy before feedings. Older babies may lose interest because they're busy exploring the world and don't want to turn their

back on the action. Reduce the competition by nursing in a dim room with no distractions.

If the strike continues for more than a week, you may be at a turning point, and your baby may be ready to wean. Consider supplementing with bottles or a sippy cup to ensure proper intake during this time. Most babies, though, will start feeding again within a week; just continue offering the breast and keep things relaxed and positive. "After two days, Erik started nursing in the middle of the night," says Selbyg. "Then each day got a little bit better."

Forget about threats and bribes. Don't make a big deal about it.

## THE NAP STRIKE

"When my oldest was 3, she decided that instead of napping she'd use that time to be destructive—she took apart her lamp and removed the knobs from her furniture," recalls Jaime Greathouse, of North Vernon, Indiana. Even the best sleepers can make a fuss about naps, especially after age 2. "Kids begin to realize that stuff is happening in the house when they're not around, and they don't want to miss out," says Bette Alkazian, a family therapist in Thousand Oaks, California.

The key is to continue to be consistent. Even if you doubt your child will nap and putting her to sleep seems like more trouble than letting her stay up, stick to your usual naptime routine. She'll probably surrender once she sees that there's very little wiggle room. If she's recently graduated from her crib to a bed, the newfound freedom may be intoxicating, so try to avoid temptation by stashing toys out of sight.

If the strike persists for weeks and she seems in good spirits throughout the evening, she may indeed be ready to give up her daily nap. This milestone is typically reached anywhere between the ages of 2 and 5. Another sign: Taking her nap causes your child to be wide awake way past her usual bedtime.

A kid will likely surrender once she sees there's little wiggle room.

## THE POOP STRIKE

"Brennan started holding it when he was 2," says Denise McVey, of Newfoundland, New Jersey. "After five days, I was freaking out." As kids gain body awareness, they may feel afraid of losing a part of themselves or falling into the toilet.

Those who have been constipated may fear painful poops.

To make eliminating easier, cut down on foods like dairy and bananas, and increase water, juice, and fruits like prunes and grapes, which tend to loosen stools, says Dr. Will Wilkoff. If this doesn't work, your pediatrician may recommend a mild, over-the-counter laxative.

However, if this strike is a way for your child to exert control in a potty-training power struggle, back off and let him choose whether to go on the potty or stay in his diapers, suggests Claire Lerner, director of parenting resources at Zero to Three, a nonprofit organization devoted to infant and toddler issues. "The more control you give your child, the sooner he'll be ready to move forward."



## THE CLOTHING STRIKE

"Jimmy became very opinionated about outfits when he was about 20 months old," says Jennifer Porter, a mother in Seattle. "Now he'll only wear a specific subset of clothes—otherwise it's warfare!" Your child's preferences are actually a sign that he's building a healthy sense of autonomy and wants to express his individuality.

Sure, it can be embarrassing when your kid wears the same purple shirt day after day, but that's okay. "When it gets really, visibly dirty, then it becomes an issue of cleanliness and having a respectable appearance," says therapist Bette Alkazian. "Put in a load of laundry together and while you wait for it to dry, talk about delayed gratification, cleanliness, and moderation." Set some basic limits and try to have a sense of humor: Kooky clothing choices will make for some hilarious pictures later on. ☐

## ✗ Put an End to Power Struggles

Getting embroiled in a tug-of-war with your child is a guarantee that you both will lose. Try these three ways to stand firm and avoid prolonged standoffs.

### Do Not Negotiate

"You're in a power struggle when you start trying to get her to accept your limits," says Claire Lerner. Be sure of yourself and the line you've drawn. Otherwise, rethink the rule.

### Stay Calm

Matter-of-factly tell your child what the rule is and how much control he can have. For instance, you might say: "It's naptime. You can either sleep or play quietly in your room. It's up to you."

### Offer Choices

Kids will be kids; they will always push for more TV, more books at bedtime, or more dessert, but when you're fair and let them be involved in some decisions, they don't have much to fight.