Testing the hygiene hypothesis in Asia

“She’s a bad mother. Look how messy that baby is!” It took a moment for me to translate the accusation into English and process the criticism being leveled. On overseas assignment in a developing country, I was eating among locals in a noodle shop, reminding myself of the hygiene hypothesis – exposure to germs early in life builds immunity. My toddler was making great strides toward self-feeding, but admittedly a few noodles missed their target. The five-second rule had met it's match.

After that incident, I took notice of the Asian culture where I lived and observed that caregivers feed their progeny until the children are upwards of five years old. These children are meticulously kept, never a speck of food on face or clothing. It seemed odd to me against a backdrop of generally poor hygiene.

There was an abundance of flies and the bowls retained a permanent, greasy gloss about them. We drank green tea from communal cups – a perfect environment for promoting the idea that our kids shouldn't be too clean.

Right or wrong, moms are judged by how clean they keep their kids and their environment. I embrace the mess and the lessons learned in the messiness of life, even if others don't always agree. But the most passionate advocates of the hygiene hypothesis may have cringed at our choice of eating establishments. This hand-sanitizer-free zone served up MSG-laced delicacies on unwiped tables. And here we sat, testing our hepatitis A vaccines, testing whether exposure to

germs is a good thing. Testing the hygiene hypothesis in Asia included a lot of mean looks for this mother and son.

What was the Asian logic of feeding a child who could feed himself? Perhaps it was because their generation had survived an era of malnutrition and starvation — a throwback to the time when not a drop of food could be spared; maybe it was the abundant supply of caregiver grandmas, aunties, and siblings; or maybe it was the deep cultural belief that families are interdependent. “This food came from my hand to your mouth. You are dependent on me – and one day I will be dependent on you.” I never pieced it all together, but I did learn that obedient children allowed themselves to be fed. Food on the face or clothing of a child was a sure sign of a negligent parent and a disrespectful child.

By contrast, I was accustomed to the philosophy that promoted propping baby in a high chair with some O’s or soft veggies as soon as he can hold up his big, wobbly head and work the pincer grasp. Don’t sweat the mess – he’s got to learn.

Travel has allowed me to evaluate a variety of parenting strategies and choose those which work for us. We aren't Asian, so it would be disingenuous to suggest I'd throw out my own cultural parenting style for another. So, where’s the balance? Who gets to define clean and dirty and the merits of independence vs. interdependence?

The answer is easier than you think. While we’re influenced by our culture, it really comes down to the parent who gets to determine the balance and boundaries for the child. I wanted to build independence, but I also wanted to instill humility and respect for their peers.

That local Asian restaurant was just another way of exploring parenting styles I use for my child, a way to apply the length and width of hygiene hypothesis while my son learned respect for a foreign culture as I fed him in public.

So, Mom, if independence is a quality you value, and the messy process of self-feeding is your instructional method of choice, don’t feed your kids. I quit feeding my kids at home as soon as they figured out that pincher grasp.

And if you’re a hygiene hypothesis advocate, have I got the place for you! But if by chance you want to instill independence and test hygiene hypothesis, you’re on your own for that journey. Brace yourself.