

Mum on a mission

One mum is on a mission to warn parents of the dangers hidden in everyday food, writes **Seana Cronin**

LILLIAN Reekie thought she had found her life's calling in primary school teaching, but after her son was diagnosed with severe behavioural issues she discovered her purpose in life was education of a different kind.

Helping busy families navigate the supermarket aisles is a passion developed from her own struggle to find relief for her son's health challenges.

Through years of research, Lillian discovered how taking food additives, like artificial colours and preservatives, out of her son's diet improved his behaviour without the need for medication.

The mother of two has written a book, *Hidden Dangers*, outlining the effects of every food additive found in Australian foods and now travels the country sharing her approach to healthy eating and child behaviour.

▼ How it all started

SINCE birth, Lillian's youngest son Caleb, now 14, had challenges with hyperactivity and aggression.

He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) when he was four.

"He was totally out of control; he was kicked out of every daycare centre in the area," says Lillian.

"Other parents were scared to bring their kids around because he was so aggressive; we were, honestly, social outcasts."

Concerned by Caleb's outbursts, Lillian and her husband Andrew sought the advice of medical specialists in the hopes of changing their son's behaviour.

"We'd been seeking answers from the time he was three or four, but the medical profession couldn't give us any suggestions except medication.

"There was no way I was going to give our son amphetamines at age four."

Once Lillian discovered that mainstream practitioners couldn't give her the answers she so desperately needed, she did her own research.

"I took bits of information from all the different people I talked to, like naturopaths, and tried them," she says.

Lillian began by removing foods that contained artificial preservatives and colours from Caleb's diet and was surprised by the instant improvement.

"It all started in our home, and when we started to get results with our son, people were asking what we were doing," she says.

Two years later she was talking to small groups at her home and printing a pamphlet with essential food additive facts.

That pamphlet turned into a short book, which Lillian continues to expand each year as new information about food additives is released.

"In the past five years I've really built on information that I share and now I'm flat out just trying to keep the seminars down to two-and-a-half hours," she laughs.



Lillian Reekie writes books and holds seminars to educate families about the hidden dangers in foods

▼ Lillian's message

THROUGH her book and seminars, Lillian hopes to help families take control over their health and warn parents of the hidden dangers lurking in everyday foods.

Lillian wants parents to become educated consumers so they can take personal responsibility for their family's health.

"We can't trust the marketing or labelling of our products because there is a lot of misinformation," she says.

"No artificial colours or flavours might be splashed across the front of a package, but the product will still have two or three flavour enhancers like MSG."

Lillian says tricky wording and numbering of additives makes it nearly impossible for busy shoppers to identify many items on the ingredients list.

By arming parents with information, Lillian steers them through the minefield that is the modern supermarket.

"I developed a code breaker that folds up in a wallet or purse so people can take it shopping," she says.

As no busy parent has the time to scrutinise the food labels of every item on the family shopping list, Lillian recommends tackling one food group at a time.

"At first, perhaps, concentrate on the

foods the kids take to school in their lunches," she says.

"It's not necessarily an easy job to seek out good products, but it's worth it."

One of Lillian's other passions is educating parents about the negative side effects of behaviour-altering medications.

"A lot of parents don't like the way their child is feeling, and even some parents who admit that the medication is working still don't want their child on meds," she says.

"It's scary how readily and easily they're being diagnosed and many parents aren't being told of the horrendous side-effects."

▼ Benefits of adversity

AFTER the transformation in her son Caleb, as well as meeting the people her book has touched, Lillian believes that out of every adversity comes a better benefit.

"Because of our adversity our whole lifestyle has changed – Andrew and I are doing something we love and making a difference."

Lillian has been brought to tears many times by letters

or phone calls from people who just want to talk to someone who understands.

"Because we're parents who have been through what they're going through, they pour their hearts out to you," she says. "They need a friendly ear because the rest of the family may not understand why they can't control their child... and I really enjoy doing that."

Lillian's experiences have also touched her eldest son Nathan, 22, who is studying to become a naturopath at university.

"He was a good child, but missed out because all of our energy went into the child who acted out," she says. "Nathan wants to help families like ours because he's grown up seeing all the challenges we had."

▼ Focus for the new year

LILLIAN is a woman with a new mission for 2008 – to bring her message of hidden dangers to local schools and daycare centres.

"Teachers are telling us that four or five, and even up to 50 per cent, of children in their classes have learning or behavioural challenges."

Lillian wants educators to understand how food and medication affects student behaviour.

"Troubled students act out to try to cover up their inadequacy at school, and it just spirals until parents and teachers don't know what to do," she says.

One special education teacher's story particularly touched Lillian at a seminar in NSW last year.

The woman was in tears because that day she demanded one of her overactive students take medication to calm down and, within half an hour, the student turned into a zombie.

"She noticed the change and, after hearing our information, said she would never do that to her students again," says Lillian.

Instead of travelling across Australia for 90 seminars as she did last year, Lillian plans to shift her focus to local schools in Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

"If we can educate the carers of young children then hopefully we might avoid a lot of the challenges that come up later in life," she says.

"Prevention is better than treatment... as they say."

THESE food additives are just a few of the hundreds that have been linked to cancer, asthma and hyperactivity:

- Tartrazine: A synthetic yellow dye often referred to as E102 and E102, used in food colouring. Derived from coal tar and commonly used in cake mixes, flavoured chips, Tim Tams, chewing gum and fruit cordial.

- Sodium nitrite: Referred to as additive 250 or E250, used to alter the colour of fish and meat and prevents the growth of botulism-forming bacteria. Can be toxic to mammals in high concentrations and has been linked with colon and lung disease.

- Aspartame: Artificial sweetener sometimes referred to as E951, but also marketed as Equal, NutraSweet and Canderel. Commonly found in soft drinks and some chewable vitamins and sugar-free gums. Possible connections between Aspartame and brain tumours, brain lesions and lymphoma.

- Glutamates: Naturally occur in protein-bound and free forms (620 to 625), but the latter has been linked with health problems. Most common form is MSG (monosodium glutamate) which helps enhance the pleasant taste of foods. It reacts with nerves and children are more susceptible because the protective myelin sheathing of their nerves is still incomplete.

For more go to www.hiddendangers.com.au