

MANY children hate eating vegetables but Henry Doole, six, wasn't just fussy about his food, he was scared of it. If his mother Holly put peas on Henry's plate he would tremble in fright and curl up into a ball.

"About a year ago we went to Sunday lunch at a friend's house and I decided to put a Yorkshire pudding and a chipolata sausage on Henry's plate," recalls Holly, 39, an artist from Portishead, Bristol.

"When he saw it he got under the table and covered in fear. It was heartbreaking. If I took him to a children's party we had to leave before the food came out. We could never stay in hotels or go out to dinner as a family because if Henry saw food not on his safety list he would freak."

Henry's aversion to certain foods began at 10 months. While the rest of the family - dad Mike, 44, sister Imogen, four, and Holly - all ate a healthy, well-balanced diet, Henry would eat only plain cereal, bread, pasta, cheese and milk.

According to Dr Gill Harris, a consultant clinical psychologist at the Birmingham Children's Hospital, food aversions in children are common and tend to affect boys more than girls.

"Every child is like this at about 18 months when they are starting to recognise foods. Only certain foods look safe to them. Although most children grow out of this fussy stage some do not. Their sense of smell or taste will be

'He covered under the table in fear'

hypersensitive and they are disgusted by certain foods.

"Many parents blame themselves but it is often an inherited trait. They will respond to everyday foods in the same way that an adult may respond if they had a sheep's eye put on a plate in front of them," adds Dr Harris.

"Some may actually gag or retch at the sight and smell of certain food. Some cannot stand to eat with their parents. For the same reason they won't be able to enter the school dining room."

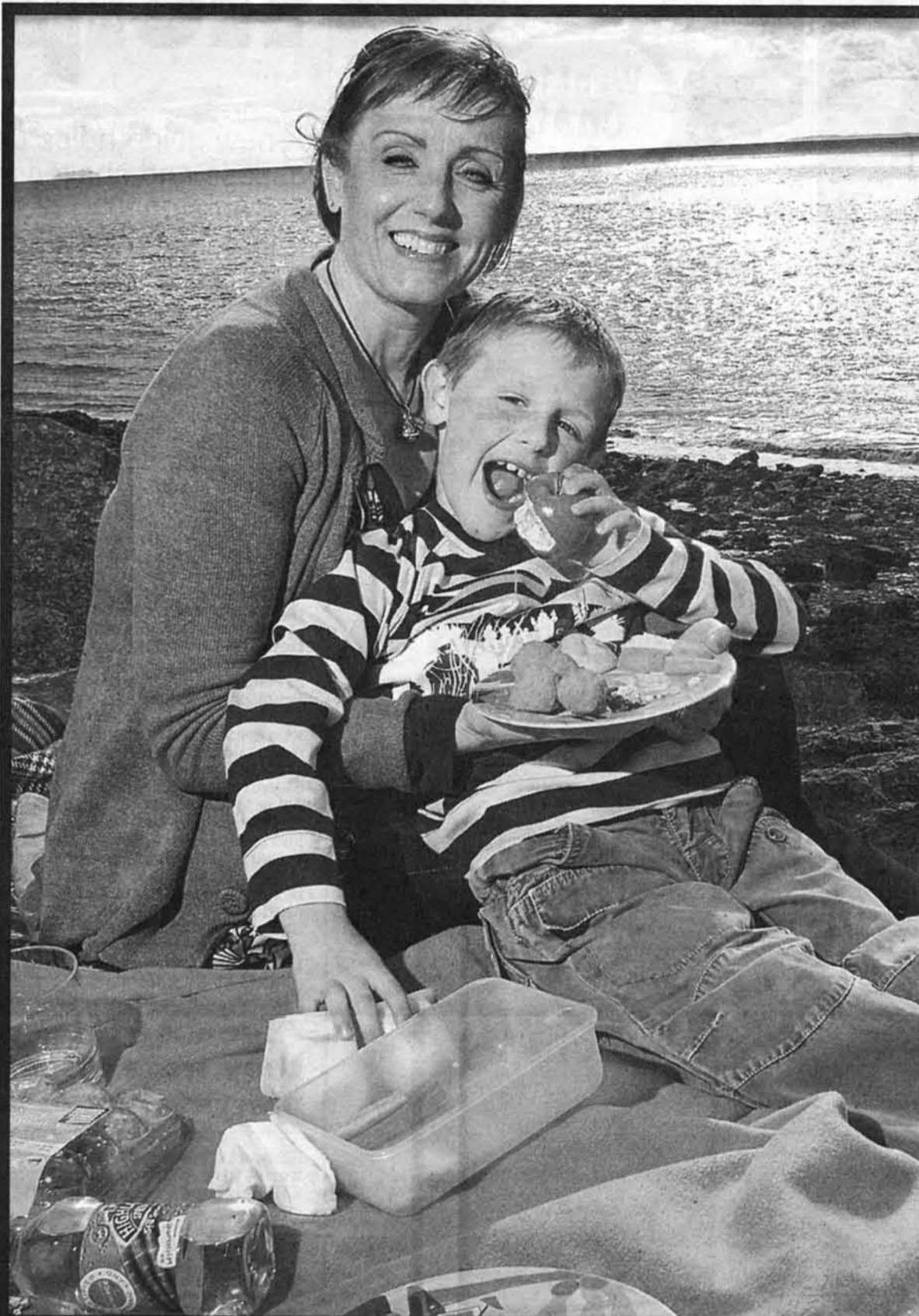
ALTHOUGH Henry wasn't excessively thin, Holly was concerned that his restricted diet wasn't providing him with adequate nutrients.

"My daughter Imogen is a fussy eater but she would try different things and had a far broader diet than he did. I hoped it would just go away but about a year ago I thought I couldn't let this go on.

"I went to my health visitor who suggested letting him do messy play, get his hands dirty and encourage him to touch foods. It did help a bit. We got him to cut up a courgette without trembling with fear which was a milestone. Yet he still refused to eat it."

When he started school Holly decided Henry should have school lunches as she thought peer pressure might help him.

"It had little effect," she says. "His teacher knew about the problem. She would sit with him



Picture: ANDY SHORT

TUCKING IN: Holly can now persuade Henry to try foods that once terrified him

MY SON WAS NOT EATING

Until he had hypnotherapy to cure his food phobia, Holly Doole's son Henry, six, found mealtimes a terrifying experience. LUCY ELKINS reports

and say: 'You can't do PE unless you eat your lunch because you won't have the strength,' but that didn't work either.

"Henry would roll up in a ball when he saw all the different foods and would touch only bread, crackers and cheese. He would often come home in a cranky mood because he was so hungry."

Dr Harris says parents should give children "safe" food initially so they get enough calories for growth and slowly introduce new tastes as they get older.

"At around the age of eight you can start to reward them for trying new foods," she says. It can be a long process as you have to get a child to taste a food 14 times before they will accept it as safe."

HYPNOTHERAPY is now being used within the NHS to help overcome childhood food phobias. Last

October Holly contacted Lynda Hudson who specialises in child hypnotherapy. She devised a personalised CD for Henry.

"I had to put it on for 20 minutes before he went to sleep," says Holly. "Within 10 days he asked to try pasta with sauce. I was amazed. I had almost given up hope of Henry trying that kind of food."

Linda says hypnotherapy helps to relax children so they are less guided by their fears. Once they are feeling calmer, you can use

'Within days he asked to try pasta and sauce'

positive suggestions which will help them feel more in control of their anxieties.

"In Henry's case I wove a story involving friends and asked him to imagine squeezing out his fears about food like he twists his Transformer toys," she says.

"I then asked him to imagine locking those fears in a box. I also asked him to imagine how proud his favourite people, such as his grandma, would be if he ate food he had never eaten before.

"Hypnotherapy involves putting subtle emphasis on key words. In Henry's case I would say 'you will enjoy your food' with a particular emphasis on the word 'enjoy'."

"CDs often work better for children than face-to-face visits. Some youngsters will find it hard to get into a calm state of mind when faced with a stranger."

Although Henry still won't touch potatoes, he is now eating chicken, apples, sweetcorn, cucumber and is starting to try other things.

"Last week we had a Chinese meal and he tried beansprouts," says Holly. "He didn't like them much but a year ago just putting them in front of him would have sent him crazy. Because we can now go to parties and restaurants, it has boosted his confidence, too," she adds. "I thought Henry would never be a normal eater. Now I can see light at the end of the tunnel."

● For more information on Lynda Hudson, visit firstwayforward.com. The UK Confederation of Hypnotherapy Organisations can be contacted on ukcho.co.uk