

## **How to Get Your Child to Eat Healthy**

If you've come here for the magic formula how to get children to eat healthy, there is no single answer, but there are endless ways to help build your child's healthy eating habits. Each child is unique and different challenges come with his or her journey to good eating habits. Rome wasn't built in a day; the process starts one step at a time.

There is a lot of venting from mothers of young children about their picky eaters. Their wish is to get their children to eat healthy but can't seem to change their ways. You can't help but wonder why. For starters, there are a few things to keep in mind. Children have a heightened sense of taste compared to adults. Adults have about 10,000 taste buds, but we were born with lot more. As we age, we lose taste buds naturally and don't regenerate them as quickly as before. Your child's picky eating may simply be a reflection of their reaction to the intense tastes they are sensing. That might explain why some toddlers and young children insist on eating plain pasta and white bread sandwiches. Rest assured, your child's heightened sense of taste isn't all bad.

### **Healthy Eating in Full Swing – Ideas & Tips**

A little bit of light-heartedness, understanding and strategy goes a long way. With the following approaches in mind, you can confidently get your child to eat healthy *and* have fun while they're at it.

#### **Let your child pick produce**

The next time you're in a produce section or farmers market with your child let them make some choices of what they may like. "Look at all the colorful food. Why don't you pick some foods and we'll make them together for dinner?" Then watch the sparks of curiosity. There's a lot more to children's picky eating habits than their supposed likes and dislikes. Oftentimes, picky eating is a way to feel independent. Picking produce empowers and inspires them so they will be more excited to taste the food at home. If they choose it, they may like it better.

#### **Prepare meals & snacks together**

Don't let the excitement end at the grocery store or farmers market. Under your supervision, let your child help you prepare meals and snacks. Children can wash produce as well as chop, tear or break apart foods like lettuce, broccoli and grapes. Children have loads of fun adding and mixing ingredients and spices so let them. When children help prepare food, they feel like they made a worthy contribution, and they did.

#### **Talk about healthy foods outside of mealtime.**

Build your children's comfort and familiarity with healthy food, and they'll feel more open to eating them. There are endless ways to talk to children and get them excited about healthy eating. Play car ride games to see who can name the most fruits and vegetables of a particular color. Encourage them to ask questions about why certain foods are good for them. Casually teach them what body parts and bodily functions are benefited by which foods. Keep them excited about eating healthy food regularly.

### Have tasting parties

If you want to introduce new foods to your child, have a themed party for her and her friends to try them. The theme can be tasting fruits and vegetables of a certain color, or healthy foods that grow on trees or in the ground. Prepare a variety of sweet and savory, bite-size samples so they can taste the many ways they can eat one food. Sadly, many of our food dislikes come from one particular way of preparing that food so prepare the same fruit or vegetable in different ways.

### Sneak it in

The possibilities are endless! Vegetable purees can be mixed into meatballs, meatloaf, sauces, and soups. Try adding fruit purees to pancakes, waffles, yogurt, pudding, and milk shakes. Mixing in chopped fruits or vegetables works but keep in mind that your child might see them. Using purees are helpful if your children won't eat something if they see chunks of it in their food. A friend made the best homemade burgers. She said she mixed spinach into the ground beef mixture because that is the only way she can get her 4-year-old daughter to eat spinach.

### Lead by example

Children are natural imitators when it comes to speech, actions, and reactions. You can be sure that they're watching and learning from you all the time, so use that to your advantage! Verbalize cravings for specific fruits and vegetables, and show how delicious they taste while eating them. Talk to children excitedly about the healthy foods you're planning to buy, or just bought, from the grocery store. Tone down your love for foods and drinks you'd rather them not get attached to – namely soft drinks and processed or fast food. Be careful to not show children that you don't like a healthy food that you want them to eat regularly. Yes, that means I will prepare raw tomatoes and possibly eat some in front of my future children.

### **If your child's picky eating behaviors are challenging, try following these tips when introducing new foods.**

Don't give up – Toddlers and young children often need multiple exposures before accepting a new food. Some kids need a new food to be offered up to 15 times. Don't decide that a child dislikes a new food after seeing them reject it a few times. Wait until you've offered it to them many more times (aim for 10-15) before you truly determine that they actually dislike it.

Let Willy do the talking – If you feel that your child stops listening to you after a while or is trying to be rebellious, bring **Willy** into the conversation. Kids may listen to a new friend who they find fun and on their level. Tell them bees are very strong and healthy and **Willy** wants them to eat their veggies so they can be strong and healthy like him.

Introduce one food at a time – This helps your child not be confused or overwhelmed.

Be consistent – Offer the food at least once a day so your child gets the chance to build familiarity with it.

Connect the dots – Once your child has accepted one food, try choosing the next new food that is similar in appearance to the first one. For example, following your child’s acceptance of diced red bell peppers with an introduction of diced tomatoes might strike the chord of familiarity needed to accept the tomatoes.



Remember these tips the next time you feel like you hit a wall with a picky eater. You might be surprised by the move toward acceptance by your kids and grateful with feeling less frustration in this journey. Persistence is the habit of victory. Let’s make a healthy difference.

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