

Getting Kids to Enjoy Healthy Foods

By Leo Fischer

Having a hard time getting your child to eat healthy? Because we naturally prefer sweet, salty and fatty tasting foods, it might appear to be hard to get kids to like and eat vegetables, when your competing with typical junk and processed foods, but that is a false assumption. Try and read the tips below to get a better understanding of what you can do to get your kid(s) to eat more healthy foods!

- Include fatty, salty and sweet flavors in vegetable dishes. Make stir-fry vegetables and add vegetables you want your kids to learn to like. Even the smallest amount of oil and salt goes a long way! For a sweet vegetable flavor, using vegetables that are already sweet like sweet potatoes, beets, carrots and natural sweeteners like stevia and certain vinegars like balsamic as a healthier substitute than sugar, honey and agave.¹
- Try not to tell your child to “Finish your soup (or anything else), please”. That will result in them eating less of whatever you tell them to eat. It also gives them a negative preference for that food in the future so they will be less likely to like it later. This strategy might be useful if a relative makes a delicious and unhealthy dish that you do not want your child to crave in the future, give the kid more than they need and require them to finish it.²
- As a parent you might say, “but if I do not tell my child to finish eating something he will never eat and starve”, and that would be an incorrect assumption. Human bodies are incredibly adapted to make sure we get exactly the nutrients we need to grow. We will intuitively select the foods our body needs based on the nutrients we need and how much. In studies where kids and babies were followed for almost 5 years and only allow them to choose their food every meal from a selection of foods, the kids chose a mostly balanced meal and grew well.³
- Kids have an increased preference for food that is given as a reward or food that is accompanied by increased attention from adults when eaten. Whenever your kid eats something that is healthy, wholefood or fruit or vegetables, give encouragement. Because of this reason, never reward a kid with junk, processed food or candy as a bargaining chip to get them to eat their vegetables. This will only reinforce the child’s preference for unhealthy food. Instead reward good behavior with and have dessert be a delicious fruit favorite like mango or banana pudding made with chia seeds. Be aware, this reward effect does not mean rewarding your child with video game, or playing outside for eating his vegetables is a good idea. In fact, that would have the opposite effect. If you tell your kid he must eat his broccoli before he can go play outside, ride his bike or play a video game, he will see the vegetables as punishment or a chore before

¹ F. Baeyens, P. Eelen, O. Van Den Berghm and G. Crombez, “Flavor-Flavor and Color-Flavor Conditioning in Human,” *Learning and Motivation* 21(1990): 434-455

² A. T. Galloway, L. M. Fiorito, L. A. Francis, and L. L. Birch, “Finish Your Soup’: Counterproductive Effects of Pressuring Children to Eat on Intake and Affect,” *Appetite* 46(2006): 318 – 323.

³ C. M. Davis, “Self Selection of Diet by Newly Weaned Infants,” *American Journal of Disease of Children* 36(1928): 651-679. C. M. Davis, “an Babies Choose Their Food?” *The Parents’ Magazine* (January 1930): 22, 23, 42, 43. C. M. Davis, “Results of the Self-Selection of Diets by Young Children,” *The Canadian Medical Association Journal* (September 1939): 257 – 261.

the pleasure. Which would decrease the preference for that food in the future. However healthy snacks for good behavior does increase preference for that food.^{4 5}

- Try not to have the food you don't want your kids to eat in your home. Get rid of the processed and sugar laden food in your home. Only have the stuff you want your kids to be eating for their health, whole foods! If other food that consumption of should be minimized is not around, you can at least be assured they won't be eating the minimized food at home. Unfortunately, as parents that means we shouldn't be a hypocrite, we must follow our own rules and set a good example.
- If you convince yourself, you can't stop eating an unhealthy processed food and continue eating it at home and, yet you also want your child to not eat that same unhealthy food. This strategy is a huge mistake, it is almost impossible for it to work that way with a good outcome. You will just make the problem a lot worse! Studies have shown that children will only learn to crave those foods more and later try harder to get those same foods they know exists at home or at a friend's house.⁶
- Help your child be a neophilic and not a neophobic type person. People who like trying new experiences have a better chance being open to trying new things and foods like vegetables. Make it fun for your kid to try new things and broadening their horizons by turning it into an adventure. Traveling is a great way! People who end up being neophobic do not like trying new foods and when they do try new foods they convince themselves it tasted bad anyways and they end up rating all new foods low.⁷
- Even if your child does not appear to like eating certain healthy foods now. Research has shown that simply exposing your child to that food over and over will increase their preference for that food eventually. Don't force it on them obviously; make each exposure fun and different.⁸
- Kids learn to dislike food eaten right before feeling illness or pain. Kids learn to like food when they have positive affects after eating it, like feeling healed or getting healthier. So, If you know your child is about take a pill that will make them vomit or have diarrhea or have some kind of bad side effect, make sure you give them candy or processed food you do not want them to eat in the future before they feel the negative effects of a treatment. That could include shots, surgery, or maybe even a painful study session! This effect known as the medicine effect also works the opposite way. Therefore, if your kid is just getting out of a bad illness, it might be advantageous to start giving them healthy vegetable and fruit dishes so they correlate the healthy food to acute healthier feelings. Now this does not mean it is ok to only feed your child

⁴ L.L. Birch, S. I. Zimmerman, and H. Hind, "The Influence of Social Affective Context on the Formation of Children's Food Preferences," *Child Development* 51(1980): 856-861.

⁵ Birch, Leann, Jennifer S. Savage, and Alison Ventura. "Influences on the Development of Children's Eating Behaviours: From Infancy to Adolescence." *Canadian journal of dietetic practice and research : a publication of Dietitians of Canada = Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en dietetique : une publication des Dietetistes du Canada* 68.1 (2007): s1-s56. Print.

⁶ J.O. Fisher and L. L. Birch, "Restricting Access to Palatable Foods Affects Children's Behavioral Response, Food Selection, and Intake," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 69(1999): 1264 - 1272

⁷ B. RAUDENBUSH, R.A. FRANK, Assessing Food Neophobia: The Role of Stimulus Familiarity, In *Appetite*, Volume 32, Issue 2, 1999, Pages 261-271, ISSN 0195-6663, <https://doi.org/10.1006/appe.1999.0229>. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666399902295>)

⁸ L. L. Birch, L. McPhee, B.C. Shoba, E. Pirok, and L. Steinberg, "What kind of Exposure Reduces Children's Food Neophobia" *Appetite* 9(1987): 171-178.

candy while they are sick, use this strategy only in modest common-sense amounts. Maybe offering moderate unhealthy foods like pizza when they are sick may be a good strategy haha

- Try not to make a facial expression of disgust or dislike when eating a food. If you want someone else to like that food. If you do, it can decrease a child's or a peer's preference for that food. ⁹
- Try not to let your kids watch television. Both the program and the advertisements for poor nutrition foods, like soda, candy and cereal, on tv that target children do in fact increase the kids likely-hood they will like, want, ask for, and eat those foods. ¹⁰ Instead have media entertainment come from sources that do not have advertising, limited advertising and no in program food cues. Good entertainment alternatives include video games and streaming sources like Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu.

⁹ F. Baeyens, D. Vansteenwegen, J. De Houwer, and G. Crombez, "Observational Conditioning of Food Valence in Humans," *Appetite* 27(1996): 235 – 250. L. Barhomeuf, S. Rousset, and S. Droit – Volet, "Emotion and Food. Do the Emotions Expressed on Other People's Faces Affect the Desire to Eat Liked and Disliked Food Products?" *Appetite* 52(2009): 27-33.

¹⁰ C. Radnitz, S Byrne, R. Goldman, M. Sparks, M. Gantshar, and K. Tung, "Food Cues in Children's Television Programs," *Appetite* 52(2009): 230-233.