



Keep it fun, so that your kids will try new things like vegetables. Remember, it takes 12 times before a baby actually prefers a new food, so don't give up!

~Veronika Van de Geer Buckley,
Maine mother

KIDS VEGGIES

How to Instill Healthy Lifelong Habits

by Clancy Cash Harrison

Starting at conception, the early years of a child's life are a perfect window of opportunity to establish a foundation of healthy eating.

Want a child to love veggies? Here are simple tips parents can practice in the first three years to establish lifelong good eating habits.

Start early. We all know that eating healthy during pregnancy will help a baby grow, but many may not realize that an infant can taste flavors *in utero* and through breast milk. Eating a variety of fresh produce during pregnancy and breastfeeding helps shape a healthy diet later in life.

Treat weaning as a time for the infant to explore the texture, taste and aroma of an array of foods. After six months of exclusive breastfeeding, food can be introduced, although breast milk is still the primary source of nutrients. Small, repeated exposures to many foods during this stage will help minimize refusals to try or accept foods in the toddler years.

Children's foods should be exploding with nutrients. Offering a variety of organic produce ensures optimal nutrition and decreases chemical exposure. Research reported by the Harvard Medical School and the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, among others, shows that richly colored foods help build dense bones, powerful brains and tough immunity. Good candidates include butternut squash, sweet potatoes, leafy greens, carrots, broccoli, berries and citrus. Also go for those naturally high in iron, such as peas, leafy greens, apricots, raisins and legumes. Avoid anything high in sugar and other sweeteners, hydrogenated oils, artificial colorings and other harmful additives.

Another important yet often overlooked foundation of healthy eating is encouraging a child to self-regulate his

or her calorie intake. Self-regulation starts on the first day of breastfeeding and is carried through adulthood. Respecting a child's decision to end a meal allows them to control their own food intake. Common signals infants use to end a meal include turning their head away, arching back, throwing food on the floor and showing an interest in other activities. To encourage self-regulation, always serve meals and healthy snacks on a schedule and allow the child to feed himself when possible.

As early as 7 months of age, most healthy infants are developmentally ready to do this, which should optimize nutrient consumption, increase participation in family meals and contribute to a less stressful mealtime. Appropriate foods for self-feeding should easily melt in an infant's mouth and be a safe size, such as soft fruits and cooked vegetables. To prevent choking, avoid round, hard and sticky foods such as whole grapes, peanuts, popcorn and nut or seed butters.

Don't be afraid to add mild herbs and spices to a child's food. An easy way to teach healthy flavor preferences, develop taste buds and reduce pickiness when they're older is to expose children to many foods, textures and aromas. A dash of cumin in smashed avocado or freshly chopped mint mixed with diced strawberries introduces new perspective on a favorite food.

Food refusal is inevitable, normal behavior. Children will love a food one day and hate it the next. Rethinking the definition of variety empowers parents to reintroduce a not-so-favorite food many times. If children don't like the way an item feels or looks, they may not taste it. The refusal of a carrot doesn't necessarily doom carrots. They can be

It's important to give the child the same food that the family eats, but in smaller servings. This allows the child to watch others eat and enjoy the same meal.

~Maria Myers Maiden,
North Carolina mother

coined, minced, mashed, puréed and diced to change the texture, plus they can be served cold, at room temperature or tepid.

A child's early adventurous eating increases the willingness to experiment with a wider range of less familiar foods as a young adult in a multicultural foodscape. Kids are not born reciting an alphabet; it takes time and practice to read and learn a new language. Similarly, it requires time and patient practice to establish a healthy foundation for eating. Have faith in the family's ability to make eating together enjoyable for everyone.

Clancy Cash Harrison is a mother of two, pediatric feeding therapist, registered dietitian and author of *Feeding Baby: Simple Approaches to Raising a Healthy Baby* and *Creating a Lifetime of Nutritious Eating*. Connect at FieldsOfFlavor.com.

Kid Feeding Tips

by Clancy Cash Harrison

- Holding off on fruits as a first food to prevent development of a sweet tooth is a myth. A sweet taste preference is engrained in an infant's DNA (*Annual Review of Nutrition; Clinical Nutrition and Metabolic Care*).
- Restricting foods high in sugar and fat increases a child's preference for them. Then, when sweets are made available, the child feels compelled to overeat them (*Appetite; The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition; Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*).
- Most children will refuse a new food and by age 2, become afraid of anything new. Therefore, introduce a large variety of foods early in life (*Appetite; International Journal of Obesity*).
- Infants and children can regulate calorie needs based on current growth patterns and age. Some days an infant will eat large amounts of food, on others very little.
- Pressuring a child to eat is a behavior associated with unhealthy eating habits. Not only does it set them up for long-term food aversions, it teaches them to distrust their internal feelings of hunger and fullness, often leading to a habit of overeating.



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