

REAL SIMPLE

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Want to Raise Open-Minded Eaters? Try These 6 RD-Approved Tips

Get your kids excited about food!

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A common complaint among parents is that their young children are "picky eaters." This usually means they don't like certain foods (or entire food groups), have strong preferences for certain textures, and/or only eat a handful of the same foods on repeat. As a result, many parents also agonize over how to get their kids to eat more fruits and vegetables. For the majority of children, picky eating is a common phase that shows up in varying degrees and for varying lengths of time. It is important for parents to understand that these phases are completely normal. Still, the way parents approach food and talk about food with their family plays a significant role in their children's relationship with food.

When food and mealtime become a point of stress, kids pick up on that and may push back against any form of pressure. In fact, studies have shown that higher levels of picky eating are associated with increased restrictions and more demands from parents, even if the intention of the parents is to encourage their children to eat more nutritious foods. While it might be hard, the most effective solutions are to be patient through these phases, and to continue to offer your child a variety of foods. Just make sure you remove any pressure on your children to eat certain things. Your primary job as a parent is to continue to offer your children many foods through all stages of development, and it is up to your child to decide whether or not to eat these foods, and how much to eat.

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Since no one wins once mealtime becomes a struggle, it's important to learn how to help our children be curious and excited about trying new foods rather than fearful of them. Here are some of my tips—with the help of some other parenting and nutrition experts—regarding how to encourage more adventurous eating at home.

Introduce Different Textures Early On

Texture is one of the most important factors to think about when it comes to feeding children. Food aversions in children may be exacerbated by limited exposure to a variety of textures from a young age. For example, the majority of the fruit and vegetable baby food pouches available in the U.S. have a thin, uniform consistency,

and even certain blenders that claim to be designed for baby food often blend ingredients into a very thin purée.

According to pediatric dietitian Pegah Jalali, MS, RD, texture is key when introducing solids to infants. "It's important that parents start where they feel most comfortable, but challenge their child with textures over time. Many parents think thin, liquidy purées are best to start babies with, but that texture is actually really hard for babies to manage," she explains. "Babies have very weak tongue musculature and movement, and it is hard for them to move those purées and swallow." Presenting your child with different textures at a young age will translate to increased food acceptance later on. In fact, numerous studies suggest that introducing different textures early in life can help children become open to more complex textures as they get older.

Different textures can be achieved by presenting a combination of different foods, or by simply changing the way a food is prepared. Take a sweet potato, for example. Below are six different textures that can be achieved from one potato just by changing the way it is cooked:

1. Thin purée is completely puréed and blended with some broth or water
2. Thick purée is completely puréed without any additional liquid
3. Soft mash is very soft, mashed by hand
4. Chunky mash is smashed, leaving a few soft chunks
5. Soft-cooked is peeled, diced, and steamed or boiled until soft
6. Roasted is skin-on, diced, and roasted until fork tender, but not completely soft

Another easy, practical way to modify textures for early eaters is to use an immersion blender, otherwise known as a stick blender. Stick blenders are a great way to partially blend soups, making it thicker than a broth-based soup, but more varied in texture than a soup that is completely puréed in a high-speed blender.

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Tell Your Little Ones a Story

Children love connecting with fictional characters. Whether via a book, television program, or song, storytelling can be an incredibly powerful medium to teach kids about food in a fun way, and spark conversations about meals. "For some kids, meals can be stressful," Jalali shares. To help alleviate that stress, she suggests looking to the bookshelf. "Reading books can feel like a low pressure place to explore feelings about food," Jalali continues. Books like Kalamata's Kitchen, Tomatoes for Neela, How to Feed Your Parents, and A to Z with Fruits and Veggies, explore the wonderful diversity of food, celebrate children in the kitchen, and illustrate how childhood food experiences can evoke strong emotions and create lifelong memories.

"I wanted to create a character who inspired kids to experience the whole world through adventures with food," says Sarah Thomas, co-founder and chief imaginator at Kalamata's Kitchen. As readers get to know the main character, Kalamata, they are introduced to the mantra "mind open, fork ready." To Thomas, this is a "really great starting point to get kids excited about trying new foods." And it works! Thomas' team gets daily messages from parents eager to share how the book has inspired their children to try new foods.

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Get Your Kids in the Kitchen

Getting children involved in meal prep on a regular basis is a powerful way to engage them in conversations about food, and help them connect with each ingredient. Having little ones lend a hand through the different steps of getting a meal on the table—from grocery shopping to clean up—is very influential. Better yet, if you have a home garden or even some indoor pots of herbs that you can use in your cooking, this is a perfect way for kids to start to make those impactful connections.

Furthermore, cooking with kids doesn't always need to involve "healthy" recipes, nor does it have to be limited to baking. Cooking can mean a lot of different things—it can translate to mashing an avocado to make guacamole, using a kid-safe knife to cut a cucumber, trimming the ends off of green beans, mixing a simple dough, putting toppings on a pizza, and more. And don't be afraid to think outside the box. For example, I use cookie cutters to make fun-shaped crackers from scratch, which are a hit with my little ones. The possibilities are truly endless, and there is

tremendous value in bringing your kids into the kitchen. Not only does it engage kids' senses, it also creates a sense of pride and connection to what they eat, making them more likely to try the food they make.

Still, one of the barriers to cooking with kids is that it's not always easy when you are trying to get a meal on the table quickly, and it can also get a little (or extremely) messy. But remember, messy often equates to *fun* for children. They should feel like the kitchen is another space for them to express themselves and be creative, which will help them continue to foster that positive connection with food.

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Siri Daly, a cookbook author and family cooking expert with Juicy Juice, agrees that getting kids involved in the kitchen is tremendously valuable. "We do this by looking through cookbooks together or at recipes online. I have them choose what they want to eat for dinner as a way to encourage them to find new meals to try," the mother of four explained. "Then, we do the whole process together—from going to the grocery store to buy ingredients, to rolling up our sleeves in the kitchen during the cooking process. If they are part of the process from start to finish, they'll be much more inclined to try new foods!"

For parents who need some additional inspiration or support getting into the kitchen with their children, there are several great platforms that offer kids' cooking kits, educational activities, recipes, and more, which are suitable for children of all ages. A few of our favorites include Kid Food Explorers, Eat2explore, Little Sous, and Kidstir.

Introduce Different Flavors Through Herbs and Spices

Herbs and spices are a really valuable way to introduce new flavors to little ones using familiar foods. You can take something that is a blank canvas, such as plain yogurt, rice, oats or pasta, and season it with fresh or dried herbs and spices to take on global flavors. Some good herbs and spices to have in the pantry that aren't overly "spicy" include dried oregano, dried mint, coriander, cumin, fennel seed, garlic powder, sweet paprika, turmeric, cinnamon, and cardamom. Examples of fresh herbs to keep on hand include parsley, cilantro, mint, basil, tarragon, and dill.

According to Jalali, using herbs and spices is great because "it helps the parents cook once for the whole family", and can shift families away from preparing entirely different meals for their children. Plus, many of these herbs and spices come with added health benefits.

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Herbs and spices also offer incredible aromas, which are a huge component of taste, so even asking your kids to smell the different spices in your spice cabinet is important exposure. Thomas suggests making a game of "blind smelling" with kids, which involves them smelling jars of different spices with their eyes closed, and then seeing if they can identify the spices with their eyes open. This game is a great opportunity "to speak with vibrant, descriptive language, or to talk about where in the world these spices come from," Thomas explains.

And if using herbs and spices is new for you or your family, make it fun by smelling or tasting different spices together and ask your child to pick which one they would like to add to the meal, selecting from a few options you present. Just be mindful of added salt when preparing food for very young children and opt for pre-made seasoning blends without any added salt if you're using a blend.

Jalali notes that another thing to be aware of is that "dried herbs and spices can also be a source of heavy metals, including lead, cadmium, and arsenic." She adds: "Babies are sensitive to even small amounts of heavy metals, so keep this in mind when introducing [dried spices to them] at a young age." The good news is that a very small amount of spice goes a long way, and it is not necessary to add herbs and spices to every single meal.

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Still, adding a dash of a different spice to a child-size serving of food even a few times a week can do wonders for exposing kids to the world of flavors they can experience. Fresh herbs are great as well, especially if kids can pick them on their own from a small garden or window planter. Some classic combos to introduce to your little ones include strawberries and mint, tomatoes or summer squash and basil, butternut squash and sage, fish or chicken and dill, avocado and cilantro.

Bring Back the Family Meal

Similar to music, food memories are often imprinted for life, from a young age. These memories can come from spending time cooking in the kitchen, but also from conversations at the dinner table, as well as rituals or traditions associated with food. With families' busy schedules, eating together may feel impossible, but the importance of the family meal is very powerful and there is evidence to prove it. Per an analysis that appeared in the journal Obesity Reviews, there is a "significant relationship between frequent family meals and better nutritional health." Additionally, this connection is present in "younger and older children, across countries and socioeconomic groups." Research also shows that the family meal does not necessarily have to be dinner, so you can figure out what works best for your family and find a time to break bread together.

Having a family meal also means there is an opportunity for everyone to pitch in to make it happen, from setting the table and preparing the food, to cleaning up. This is all part of the social aspect of eating, which helps children feel like they're not just eating food to quell their feelings of hunger, but are actually participating in a meaningful moment in their family's day. Serving a family meal *family style* has even more benefits, giving kids some autonomy about what they eat, and how much. Plus, seeing other members of the family try a variety of foods on a regular basis can have a positive influence on kids' food choices. For picky eaters, always serve something familiar that you know they will like alongside any new foods, and keep the food choices to three or less so your kids don't get overwhelmed.

RELATED: [7 Sneaky Ways to Squeeze More Fruits and Vegetables into Your Diet](#)

Be Patient

Raising an open-minded eater doesn't happen overnight, and even children who grow to have the most adventurous little palates will still have picky periods. But don't give up! It may take more than a few times of offering a new food for your child to like it or even be willing to try it. Repeated exposure is key, but you should also be mindful to not put any pressure on your child to eat specific foods. In fact,

research shows that children may need to be offered food up to 15 times before they like it, and it's common for little ones to be hesitant about trying new things.

"Remember, some kids only say they don't like a certain food because they've never tried it," Daly shares. "As parents, it's important to not give up or get frustrated with them and remember that their palates are still developing ... something they dislike one day may be a new favorite the next!" Above all, if children feel safe around food and mealtimes can be a positive and fun space, kids will feel comfortable enough to do their own exploring in their own time.