The Way to Your Kids' Stomachs Is Through Their Heads: 10 Tips from a Mother of "Good Eaters"

By Larissa Kosmos

Published on Babble March 2010

My kids cringe at the sight of asparagus. Dinner involves feeding our four-year-old son, who has two working arms, because he's distracted by a speck on the wall, his seven-year-old sister, a pressing thought about bees, the air in the room. Reminders about table manners go in one ear and out the other. (Actually, I'm not sure that anything enters the first ear.) I wouldn't have thought to describe my kids as good eaters, but I hear this comment repeatedly. The thing is, while they would prefer chicken nuggets, my kids do eat asparagus and—with varying levels of enthusiasm, complaint, or indifference—avocado, edamame, sweet potato, spinach, cauliflower, sauerkraut, black bean soup, and all kinds of fish and meat. I don't have a magic pot, but I have made a valuable discovery that helps make this happen: Getting kids to eat well starts with their brains. Their reluctance to try certain foods is mostly a matter of perceptions, not tastes. After all, they often refuse something before even tasting it. Therefore, beyond steaming and grilling in the kitchen, I marinate and season my kids' ideas about eating. At dinner time, it's this preparation of their thoughts, and not my preparation of the meal, that makes a difference.

You say potato, I say big, round mother of French fries.

Language shapes our thoughts. I found that attitudes toward dinner changed when I renamed *leftovers night, choices night.* The contents of the various containers in the fridge were the same, but—with a simple name change—the perception of them improved. With the help of words, mouths open more eagerly when I serve magic soup, Super Guy spinach, and pineapple power. The possibilities are endless. The word 'power' fits well with most foods, and it's a concept which appeals to kids. In a restaurant recently, I told my kids they'd be sharing a meal called pizza chicken, which was prepared with red sauce and melted cheese. Once they were happily eating it, I told them that most people called this chicken parmesan. And sometimes, when my children ask what's for dinner, I pepper my answer with a few adjectives: "We're having juicy pork tenderloin; cold, sweet apple slices; and warm buttery rice." I try to get them enjoying the meal before it's even prepared.

Keeping up with the Joneses.

When my four-year-old son is busy rolling up the side of his placemat instead of eating dinner, I tell him that his good friend next door is doing a nice job eating, which will make him grow. (At this age, he doesn't question my claims; I'm his mother. I'm all-knowing.) Well, heaven forbid John get a leg up on growing tall! I see the thought register in my son's eyes and he instantly puts a bite of chicken in his mouth. Competition can be a good motivator.

Hannah Montana likes bananas.

Telling my seven-year-old daughter that her friend Julian likes to eat raw peppers convinced her to try one. She didn't like it, but the important thing is that she gave it a chance. Hearing an endorsement of a food sets an expectation: If a friend likes it, it might not be half-bad. When I don't have a "friend and food fact" handy and a new food I set on the table is met by skeptical looks, I occasionally say, "Some kids *love* this." (How do I know? I heard it from other moms—it doesn't matter whether it was in the school yard or in a magazine.) My kids naturally want to experience what other kids are experiencing. And somewhere in the world, I bet there are at least 9 kids who like this food. Another option is to create an endorsement using a character your child likes. I believe I heard that Batman loves scrambled eggs.

Why did the chicken nugget cross the road?
To meet the mysterious chicken paprikash on the other side.

When your children hesitate to taste a new food, remind them that they were once reluctant to try something which they now enjoy. The example I use with my daughter is avocado sushi rolls. Being that these are her absolute favorite food, she can't believe that it took a little coaxing before she tried her first one. With that in mind, I suggest that the foreign food on her plate right now may be a new favorite; she might be missing out if she doesn't give it a chance. Even if your child never looked quizzically at her first chunk of watermelon, give yourself permission to adjust history in the re-telling of it. I think the end justifies the means. After all, you're pushing peas, not drugs.

The rule of the plate-ground: Cucumbers and couscous take turns.

While your young child is learning what's fair—on a play date, in preschool, at the playground—you can transfer the concept to her plate. She shouldn't keep shoveling the sausage and rice if broccoli has not yet had a turn. That's not fair to the broccoli, which needs a chance to nourish her body, too. I floated this concept once with my son and was amazed at how receptive he was. I think it's because he understood the value of giving everyone a turn. Also, he was suddenly put in the position of presiding over something—his plate—which it seems made him feel important. We still use this model with him regularly. To make the concept more fun and reflective of play, I've told him that the bites of food he consumes go down a slide into his belly. Have fun, broccoli! The rice and sausage will meet you at the bottom.

Grab your backpacks! Vamanos! You can lead the way! Hey!

The ever-enthusiastic Dora goes on adventures, and when my daughter was preschool aged and in a difficult eating phase, I told her that she would be an adventurer, too—at the dinner table. Following a basic principle I picked up in a book—that trying new foods should be valued over clearing your plate—I dubbed our program "adventure eating." For every new food my daughter braved, I would put a little smiley face sticker on the calendar for that day, naming and numbering the foods, one through five. Once she had sampled five new things, she earned her reward: a trip to the store to buy a strip of stickers. My daughter was proud to be dubbed an adventure eater. In taking inventory of how close she was to earning the next prize, she liked to look back at the smiley faces on the calendar, asking me to remind her of what new foods she had eaten. In doing so, the sense of accomplishment returned and propelled her toward the next dinner adventure.

With the thigh bone connected to the hip bone, and the hip bone connected to the back bone…

When Saul Junior is having a stand-off with a strip steak and you want him to eat it, say something beyond "It's good for you." This worn-out phrase is vague and unconvincing. Instead, be specific in highlighting the food's benefits and make the explanation relevant to him: This steak will strengthen your arm muscles so you could swing across the monkey bars. Carrots will boost your vision so that you can spot far-away planes. When I explain the value of food in a concrete and relevant way, my kids are motivated to eat. For older children who may not be easily swayed, consider doing a quick internet search to substantiate your claim. With little ones, you can just wing it, referring to bone strength, muscle power, and the like. This strategy becomes more effective when you reinforce the importance of good eating throughout the day. As your child manages to climb up a slide or solve a math problem, you might say, "Looks like eating that fish last night helped." Making this kind of link can bolster your efforts at the dinner table.

And the back bone connected to the neck bone, and the neck bone connected to the head bone…

Here's a spin-off of the above strategy for a young reluctant eater: Right before your child sits down to eat, measure her against the wall. A rough estimate with your hand is good enough. Remind her that the meal on her plate will help her grow and that you're going to measure her again when she's done to see if it worked. This trick provides incentive galore for eating, not to mention giddy anticipation of the follow-up measurement. Naturally, if the child eats well, discover that she's a smidgeon taller and if she doesn't eat, tell her she'll have a chance at the next meal. Don't feel too guilty about fibbing. After all, the food *is* working for their bodies and helping them grow, just not in immediately measurable ways. You and your children can enjoy hard proof of their growth when they try on clothing from the previous year. When we realize that a shirt is snug going over my son's head or that my daughter's pants are short, I remind them that they're doing a good job eating. Feeling responsible for their development brings them great satisfaction.

Bruno, my sugar cube, don't eat anything on this plate. Just watch it for me.

Reverse psychology. When my son was between two and three, I realized this set-up was hugely entertaining for him and successful in getting him to eat by himself. I would turn around to unload some items from the dishwasher and then check back on the plate of food he was supposed to be guarding. When I saw that he had eaten a bit, I would feign shock and anger, looking around for the culprit who had stolen bites of my lunch. I'd charge him with the duty of plate watch again, and we repeated the skit. Knowing I had a good reaction in store—sometimes more exaggerated and comical the second or third round—he would continue eating "my" food. Having to play act can be exhausting, but it beats pleading with your child to eat and being frustrated when he doesn't.

Dinner Theater

I don't like it when "I don't like it" slips from the lips of my children as they're staring down at a meal that I spent good minutes of my waning middle age energy preparing.
Because the unpopular food is a part of their dinner, I usually require they eat a certain number of bites of it. This is the cue for the red velvet curtain to open. Enter drama queens and kings with expressions of anguish and suffering: Oh, the horror! Warm, nutritious food. The injustice! I've uncovered a few ways to quell the performances at our private dinner theater. First, validate the fact that your child doesn't like something. I'll say, "That's normal. You won't like everything to the same degree. Sometimes tastes change. We'll see with this one." You might tell her that when you were a kid, you didn't like particular foods either. In relating to your child with an example, you'll undo the "us and them" dynamic which curdles the mood at dinner. Instead, as a former kid and a current kid, work out a strategy to get those four bites of corn eaten: Suggest she mix a spoonful of the corn with something she likes, so the taste is less noticeable. Eat it first and get it out of the way. Eat every bite followed by a sip of milk. Just eat it!

Finally, consider these tips like kitchen utensils. What works with some meals may be futile for others. Use them alone or in combination, and when something fails, stick it in a drawer, forget about it, but pull it out down the road for a second try. Incidentally, the recommendations I've made here are not solely my invention. They are collaborated by, uh, Doctor Edward Cauliflower, an expert on child nutrition at, um, The University of Arugula in Belgium. If nothing on this list works for you, with any of your children, after multiple tries, direct your complaints to him. But if Arty agrees to try the artichoke dip, please share the good news below.