

10 More Strategies for Getting Your Kids to Eat

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If I were the mother of aquarium fish, my job would be a cinch. Fish do not need to be called twice to dinner: Sprinkle a few flakes and they gobble them up with the voracity of sharks. Equally appreciative are the sea lions at the zoo. Despite getting the same meal day in and day out—cold herring out of a white bucket, no dipping sauce—they not only snap them up, they return on command to do tricks. And I'm positive that pigeons spend more time eating than flying. Pecking away at the carbs on the concrete—discarded hamburger bun, unfinished bagel—they are a shameless and public overeaters' club. So why must feeding children be difficult? The prodding. The refusals. The sour looks. I wish I could toss some Scooby snacks to my seven-year-old daughter and four-year-old son, set out a couple bowls of water, and call it lunch. While it will never be this simple, I've figured out some strategies to get my kids—and perhaps yours—to eat:

She ate an itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny yellow pepper and zucchini.

When you're encouraging your reluctant child to taste something new, make the sample bite so ridiculously small that, besides being non-threatening, it actually becomes funny: Cut a pea in half. Reduce a bite of salmon to one pink fleck. Put a single grain of brown rice on a spoon. Do this to minimize the pressure on your child, to increase the chance she'll try the item, and just to lighten up, especially when Susie's stubbornness is making your nerves snap, crackle, and pop. If you're relaxed and use a bit of humor, your kids will feel at ease, too, which can make dinner more successful. Tell your child that the newspapers will want to cover her feat: Girl in Michigan eats tiniest bit of beet ever served. Suggest using a magnifying glass to verify that the microscopic bite is indeed on the fork.

Double, double toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Get a crock pot. Also known as a slow cooker, this terrific tool guarantees that dinner's ready by a certain time; simplifies the dinner-making process; and enables your kids to participate in cooking. Having kids help prepare a meal is a swell idea, but when you're cooking around the time that everyone's getting hungry and you're moving quickly, it's not practical and also not safe when heating elements are on. On the other hand, crock pot cooking is ideal for young sous chefs; they toss things into the pot while it's cold, hours before dinner. Slow-cooking requires planning: You pick a recipe and have the ingredients on hand the night before. If you'll be short on time in the morning, consider chopping and measuring your ingredients in advance. Then, for most recipes, you simply pour, dump, and stir everything in the big pot, which is fun work for kids. Flip the switch and enjoy the satisfaction that, before the breakfast dishes are cleared, dinner is made. The aroma of your meal builds for hours. I love it when my kids say, "Mm, smells good," anticipating the dinner they assembled long before they'll eat it.

Spice Girls... and Spice Boys

If you want little Rosemary to eat chicken with thyme, help her get acquainted with spices. On a rainy day, pull all the spices from the cabinet (it's a chance to do inventory and make sure nothing is hatching or wriggling in there). Sniff each one and learn their names. Perhaps you can tell your children where they may encounter the spices: oregano is on pizza, garlic powder is in chili, cinnamon is on French toast, etc. To extend the study and challenge their memories, blindfold and quiz them. Becoming familiar with spices will make them less threatening when your kids notice the specks and flecks in their meals. A word of caution: Demonstrate to your children the difference between sniffing and inhaling. Accidentally vacuuming a spice into the nostril is very unsettling for a child and cannot be quickly undone. (Ahem—I know.)

Feed the worms to your birds early.

When I'm running late with dinner, the kids' hunger combines with their tiredness and—voila!—they turn crabby. (Hey, guys, who's game for eggplant?) Mind-set is everything, and timing affects mind-set. My kids eat best when I serve them dinner early, usually between 5 and 5:30 but, if they're hungry, even by 4:30 p.m. on a school night, before I have an appetite, before my husband is home. Nightly family dinner is a lovely concept, but it doesn't take into account some realities: Children often need to eat—a hearty, warm meal, not just snacks—before parents return from work. And while the impetus for family dinner is the conversation, while our kids are young, and when the clock is ticking toward bedtime, especially during the school year, when we still have the wash-up rituals and nightly reading to fit in, and especially when portions of food are not shrinking, my husband and I would rather have them stop gabbing and eat. Besides, in my book, quality family time is not dependent on consuming food together. If the kids have eaten early, then once both parents are home, you'll all have time for taking a walk, reading a long story, playing a game or tossing around a ball. Doing something like this, the four of us relax and enjoy each other more than when we're seated at a meal. The nights we follow this scheme, my husband and I put the kids to bed and then eat a peaceful dinner alone, which—at this stage of our lives—is at least as valuable as a family dinner.

Snack-ademic Challenge

To see your kids willingly eat fruit and have fun with them at the same time, conduct a taste bud test: Blindfold or ask them to close their eyes. Then feed them red and green grapes, one at a time, and see if they can identify which color they're eating. You could do the same with yellow and red apples, green and brown pears, red and yellow tomatoes, different color peppers. To expand this exercise into a more substantive snack or even lunch, bring out the cheese—white and yellow cheddar, two kinds of lunch meat. For kicks and bit of crunch, see if your kids can distinguish between different colors of goldfish crackers you feed them. If they aren't immediately into this whole idea, ask them to test you. As they feed you—watching you chewing, thinking, enjoying the challenge with your eyes covered—they might decide it'd be fun to have a turn, too.

Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and green beans

Don't wait until dinner to expand tastes. On the weekend when schedules tend to be flexible, try introducing a new food earlier in the day, at a casual lunch or during snack time, maybe breakfast if everyone's well-rested and sunshine-y. Particularly if dinner time is the stage for protests and drama, it's good to catch your picky eater off guard. And if he's the really difficult type who has built a solid wall of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to block himself from outside foods, then you must adopt the stealth of a secret agent to breach the wall: At a random time, as he walks by the kitchen, say, "Hey, would you describe this as creamy?" while holding toward his mouth a pretzel stick dipped in (his first taste of) hummus. Or, if you're casually offering him a small chunk of cantaloupe, "I can't decide if this is sweet or super sweet." Maybe, just maybe, you can catch him at a time his stubbornness is defrosted.

Mix raisins into the meatloaf.

This unique idea belongs to my mother-in-law. A full-time mom of five, she was frustrated one morning when none of her kids ate the oatmeal with raisins that she had prepared. Well, she figured, if they wouldn't eat it for breakfast then, by golly, they would have it for dinner, and—unbeknownst to the family—she scraped the uneaten oatmeal into her meatloaf mixture, which called for dry oatmeal anyway. Later at dinner, she suppressed her giggles, waiting to see who would first notice that this particular meatloaf was studded with raisins.

This story is not only hilarious, but it's a springboard for an eating strategy: Put an unexpected and sweet ingredient—apple chunks, raisins, any kind of dried fruit—in a dish that doesn't call for it. This could

work in rice, burgers, soups, casseroles. Be sure that everyone's portion includes a bit of the sweet item, and then tell your children to be on the look-out for a surprise ingredient, seeing who can identify it first. It will keep everyone in suspense and, even better, eating!

The Fruit Patrol

Aiming to increase my family's intake of fruits and vegetables, I thought it would be useful to keep track of how many each of us was consuming daily. Coincidentally, my daughter was in need of an activity in the first lazy, hazy days of summer. I gave her the esteemed title of Fruit Patrol (although Produce Patrol would be more accurate) and charged her with recording our fruit and vegetable consumption, with five per person, per day, as our goal. We repurposed a half-used notebook as our Fruit Patrol Journal: one page a day with plenty of space between family members' names for listing what we had eaten. On the inside cover, I made lists of fruits and vegetables so that my daughter wouldn't have to repeatedly ask me how to spell something. It's been good writing practice for her. If your fruit patrol person is too young to write, he or she could make slash marks or draw pictures next to each name. Another option is to keep track on a dry erase board. Any way you do it, keeping a daily inventory inspires everyone to eat more produce.

Rubber ducks, bubbles, and Brussels sprouts.

Feed your kids while they're in the tub—not as a habit, but once in a while when time is short, and they're both dirty and hungry. I first multi-tasked bathing and eating when I was alone with my kids, feeling spent from the day, and eager to fast-forward to their bedtime so I could finally relax. I discovered that my kids ate agreeably in the tub. It made sense: They eat well when they're in a good frame of mind, and they're happy as clams together in the tub, not at all focused on the food I'm delivering to their mouths. Yes, this method requires actually feeding your children, even if they're old enough to eat by themselves, but there are benefits: By your hand, the meal goes down efficiently. And I find that sitting tub side forces me to slow down and smell the roses. Naked, eating chicken pot pie, and being silly with each other, my kids are adorable. With bellies full and bottoms clean, we have ample time for a story. (Beware: As you're showering the next morning, you'll wonder what that squishy brown mystery item is under your toe. Ah, yes—a crumb of last night's meatballs that missed Mikey's mouth.)

Scraps

- Serve soup with a straw. Less of the soup will end up on a shirt or lap, and because drinking through a straw is fun, your kids will quickly transport soup to belly. They could also use their straws to spear vegetable chunks.
- To help get kids accustomed to eating pears or apples with the peels on, start gradually: With a peeler, skim around the fruit, leaving one band of skin in the middle like a belt. Then progress to peeling the fruit in stripes, half the skin on, half off, so that it resembles a zebra, until your child gets comfortable enough to eat the whole peel.
- Make fruit a side dish with dinner. Why not? The sweet flavors of apple, pear, grapes, and pineapple, for example, complement chicken, pork, and fish. And there's no cooking required.
- Get your child her own mug, something colorful, maybe personalized, and use this mug for serving oatmeal and cream of wheat, soups and stews. My kids cheer when I bring out their individually decorated cat mugs, not even knowing what they contain. A positive attitude at the start of a meal is invaluable.

- If a recipe calls for onion, don't refrain from using it because your kids don't like it. Instead, pulverize the onion in a food processor until only a detective could lift it from the dish with tweezers and identify it.

Finally, you're not alone when you get frustrated that your children aren't eating. I'm working out new feeding strategies all the time. Some work and some don't. But hey, kids are not cats. They're not low maintenance. Take heart, though, because they'll turn out smarter than dolphins; their tricks are more varied than the dog's; and I've never known a hamster to make a Mother's Day card.