

RAISING HEALTHY EATERS

How to Train Children's Palates from the Cradle On

by Jeannette Bessinger
and Tracee Yablon Brenner



America is in the midst of an epidemic of childhood obesity that is creating a health crisis for our kids.

According to the Nestlé Nutrition Institute's often referenced Feeding Infant and Toddler Study (FITS), many U.S. children are eating a poor quality diet too high in calories and too low in nutrition. About one in three older babies and toddlers are not eating a single vegetable on a given day, and eating habits don't improve as children get older.

Today's typical American diet is clearly not working. According to a benchmark National Cancer Institute study, only 1 percent of all children between the ages of 2 and 19 years met all requirements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Guide pyramid. Sixteen percent of the children met none of the pyramid recommendations. In 2010, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) reported that upwards of 23 million U.S. children and adolescents are now overweight or obese and currently at risk for other health problems associated with obesity. That's nearly one in three children.

Early Training

Nationwide efforts to address these health issues have demonstrated that early prevention is easier than intervention

after problems have taken hold. Parents can begin cultivating healthy eating habits in their children right from the cradle. Establishing a few key parental practices can have long-ranging benefits for the family.

The first tip is to keep a neutral attitude about food, even if it's counterintuitive. When introducing solids to a child, it is helpful to present the foods in a relaxed, neutral way, with no pressure to eat them. As the youngster grows, avoid labeling certain foods as good, bad or even healthy to sidestep the response, "This is good for me? I don't like it!"

Parents do well to remain patient. It can take up to 15 presentations before a child is willing to try something new, and then several tastings before they decide they like it.

It also helps to offer a variety of flavors from a very young age to familiarize children with many dimensions of tastes and textures. Though babies initially prefer sweet tastes above all others, as youngsters grow, their preferences tend toward what is familiar. When introduced early on to variety and consistently offered healthy whole foods, including all the veggies, these come to comprise their preferred diet.

"The first three years of a child's life are a window of opportunity for forming lifelong, healthy eating habits."

Dr. William Sears, author, professor of pediatrics at the University of California-Irvine School of Medicine and founder of AskDrSears.com

Continuing Practices

It's always wise to offer food to children only when they are actually hungry. When kids eat a continuous flow of simple carbohydrates, such as white crackers and sweetened cereals or even 100 percent juices, it keeps their blood sugar levels slightly elevated, which can create problems.

Nutritionists see firsthand how such a diet prevents the

true hunger signal from turning on fully, which in turn can cause little ones to act finicky about certain foods, especially vegetables. It can also prompt them to eat less of more nutritionally balanced foods on their plate at mealtimes.

In children who have any type of blood sugar sensitivity, the more sweet foods they eat, the more they will tend to want. If a parent wants to offer a sweet snack, include some additional fiber, protein or healthy fat to balance it, because these nutrients act as a time-release mechanism for sugars and will help to regulate a more natural appetite rhythm.

According to the ADA's *Pediatric Manual of Clinical Dietetics*, vegetarian children tend to be leaner than their non-vegetarian peers; it doesn't mean that simply eliminating meat is a recipe for obesity prevention. According to the ADA, a varied and appropriately planned vegetarian diet can meet all of a growing baby and toddler's nutritional needs. But it is even more crucial to keep the blood sugar levels balanced in vegetarian toddlers, because they aren't receiving proteins from animal sources. On the plus side, young vegetarians are more likely to eat a broader range of fiber and micronutrient-rich fruits, veggies and beans.

To encourage reluctant youngsters to eat more vegetables, try roasting them, especially green produce and root veggies. Also serve a new vegetable in a way similar to one that they already like; e.g., baking homemade sweet potato fries cut in familiar shapes. Kid-size veggies like mini-broccoli trees or baby carrots have appeal. Dressing up plain veggies with dips and shakers of a mild herb, spice, Parmesan cheese, ground seeds or wheat germ adds to the fun.

Finally, encourage toddlers to help out in the kitchen by asking them to wash and sort the veggies or arrange them in a pretty way on the platter. If children are involved in preparing foods, they are more likely to eat them.

Jeannette Lee Bessinger, an award-winning lifestyle and nutrition educator, and Tracee Yablon Brenner, a registered dietitian, founded RealFoodMoms.com. These certified health counselors have co-authored two practical guides for families: Great Expectations: Best Food for Your Baby and Toddler and Simple Food for Busy Families.

Protective Food Practices

- **80 percent rule:** Don't worry too much about what your child is eating outside the home. If s/he is eating a varied diet of high quality whole foods at home 80 percent of the time, everyone's on the right track.
- **Make the connection:** Help a child understand the relationship between our food supply and the natural world. Visit an organic farm or help young ones start a garden.
- **The pristine pantry:** Put the child in charge of what foods they actually eat at a meal while parents stay in charge of the foods available. Keep unhealthy foods out of the house.

Healthy Eating at Every Age

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Best Solid Foods at 6 to 9 Months

- Cooked and puréed vegetables such as carrots, green beans, green peas, pumpkin, spinach, zucchini and summer and winter squash
- Cooked and puréed fruits such as applesauce, apricots, peaches, pears, prunes and raisins
- Raw and mashed fruits such as avocados, bananas, melons and papayas
- Soft-cooked whole grains such as iron-fortified brown rice cereal, oats and pearled barley
- Protein foods such as plain full-fat yogurt or small amounts of tahini (sesame seed butter—always thin and mix seed butters with other foods to prevent choking)

Note: At 6 to 7 months, choose one per day; 8 to 9 months, choose two per day, including cooked and puréed lentils and split peas and, if not allergic, egg yolk, hard cooked and mashed, or cooked into hot cereal, not more than three times a week, as well as medium, soft or silken plain tofu mashed (1 to 2 tablespoons), also not more than three times a week.

Tip: When introducing a baby to new foods, include as many vegetables as fruits to help train tiny taste buds to enjoy the bitter, sour and astringent flavors, as well as the sweet ones.

Best Foods at 9 to 12 Months

- Add new cooked and puréed vegetables such as beets, broccoli, cauliflower, kale and eggplant
- Add new raw and mashed fruits such as kiwi and mango
- Add soft-cooked whole grains such as amaranth, millet and quinoa
- Include cooked and minced whole grain pastas such as brown rice, quinoa and spelt
- Add more proteins, such as ground, hormone-free beef, lamb, chicken and turkey; introduce with caution in case of allergies: mild, soft cheeses (not raw) such as cottage, ricotta, cheddar and provolone; beans such as cannellini, navy, great northern (add a small amount of kombu or epazote to cooking water to increase digestibility of beans)

Tip: Baby's pincer grip develops between 9 and 12 months, so retain small, soft pieces of food in their purées to pick out with small fingers.

Best Foods at 12 to 18 Months

- Expand types of proteins to encompass fish such as wild Alaskan salmon, sardines, tilapia, cod (one serving per month to minimize ocean toxins), skipjack or chunk light canned tuna (no-sodium, no more than one serving per week)



- Include milk and whole eggs
- Add healthy fats such as small amounts of butter, ghee, coconut oil, chopped olives and coconut milk

Tip: At this age youngsters feel a new adventurousness about foods, putting all manner of things into their mouths. Take advantage of this window by offering a broad range of different food experiences.

Best Foods at 18 to 36 Months

- From this point on, children can eat all types of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans and other types of protein foods
- Families at risk for food allergies can cautiously introduce allergenic foods such as fish, seafood, peanuts or tree nuts after 36 months, while monitoring their reception

Tip: Many toddlers go through periods of finicky responses to foods. Be patient, relax and trust that over the course of a week, rather than any single meal or day, children are likely getting their basic nutritional needs met.