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Developmental Psychology

Tips for parents – from research to everyday life

#5: How to make healthy food palatable for my child?

Wiener
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Many children are picky regarding food. Some undergo phases in which they would like to eat French fries or noodles every day. This can be challenging for parents: How do I introduce my child to a healthy diet? Does this work without diminishing the pleasure of eating or constantly provoking conflict? It is important that food is always associated with pleasure for both children and their parents and that the family's dining table does not become a place of constant quarrelling. This requires patience, but it can work. We have compiled several concrete research-based tips:

Variety works.

A good way to make infants grow accustomed to a healthy diet is to regularly offer them a variety of different foods, especially fruit and vegetables.¹ Studies show that it is a good idea to offer children as diverse a range of healthy foods as possible: The more types of fruit and vegetables children are offered, the more likely they are to also accept new varieties and tastes.²

Why is this the case? Our taste preferences already develop in early childhood. A preference for sweet and salty foods is innate but liking bitter-tasting ones, such as certain types of vegetables, must be acquired. If children are familiarised with diverse tastes and flavours from an early age, they are more open to different foods later, even foods that do not just taste sweet or salty.

Social interaction at the dining table is important

Having a meal should be fun and the best way to eat is in company. When the family gathers at the dining table in a relaxed atmosphere, this is a good prerequisite for promoting a healthy eating behaviour among the young ones. Studies demonstrate that children's eating behaviour is influenced by other people.³ If they are seeing that others in their surrounding try out and enjoy new foods, it increases the probability that they will do the same. This applies to both adult role models and other children, such as their siblings.

Why is this the case? A relaxed atmosphere creates a feeling of safety and facilitates a positive mood, which also makes children more open to try new things. Research shows that being sceptical about unknown plants could have an evolutionary

basis, since we cannot directly see if plants contain toxins or are inedible.⁴ Being cautious when eating unknown plants is therefore normal and this caution must be overridden first. Therefore, babies and infants are using other people in their surroundings as guidance with relation to their eating behaviour, especially concerning fruit and vegetables. This means that parents act as important role models.

Persistence leads to success.

The most effective method to get children into new foods and tastes is to offer these again and again. According to studies, it may take 5-15 trials until infants accept a new type of food.⁵ However, it is not even necessary that they eat an entire portion. Small bits for trying it out, ideally combined with known and favourite foods, are especially effective. Forcing a child to follow a certain eating behaviour or to tamper with them by using preferred foods, according to the principle: You only get dessert if you eat all the vegetables, is counterproductive.⁶ This might make unhealthy food even more attractive.

Why is this the case? For children in the kindergarten age, it is important that they are gaining more and more autonomy. They have to learn to independently control their eating behaviour. If parents strictly control what and how much their child is eating, their child does not learn to listen to their bodily signals, such as a feeling of satiety. This increases the risk of obesity later in life.¹ On the other hand, parents can encourage their child, by offering diverse healthy foods again and again, to be open to new foods, to develop their own taste preferences and to control their eating behaviour on their own in a better way.

Find out more at:

www.kinderstudien.at/en

¹ Birch, L., Savage, J. S. & Ventura, A. Influences on the Development of Children's Eating Behaviours: From Infancy to Adolescence. *Can J Diet Pract Res* 68, 1–56 (2007).

² Mennella, J. A., Nicklaus, S., Jagolino, A. L. & Yourshaw, L. M. Variety is the spice of life: Strategies for promoting fruit and vegetable acceptance during infancy. *Physiology & Behavior* 94, 29–38 (2008).

³ Addessi, E., Galloway, A. T., Visalberghi, E. & Birch, L. L. Specific social influences on the acceptance of novel foods in 2–5-year-old children. *Appetite* 45, 264–271 (2005).

⁴ Wertz, A. E. How Plants Shape the Mind. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 23, 528–531 (2019).

⁵ Hodder, R. K. et al. Interventions for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption in children aged five years and under. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 5(5). Art. No.: CD008552 (2018)

⁶ Vaughn, A. E. et al. Fundamental constructs in food parenting practices: a content map to guide future research. *Nutrition Reviews* 74, 98–117 (2016).

