

15 Ways to Get Your Kids to Eat Better

A nutritionist who's also the mother of 7-year-old triplets gives tried-and-true tips for getting your child to eat vegetables, drink milk, try new foods, and more.

By Julie Burns, R.D.

Parents

Every single day, I deal with picky eaters both big and small. I'm the mother of 7-year-old triplets, all of whom have very different eating habits; I'm also a dietitian who teaches the professional athletes on the Chicago Bears and Chicago Bulls teams how to improve their diets. Although it's tough to convince a towering basketball player or a 300-pound linebacker that junk food is bad for him, trying to get my kids to eat well can be even more of a challenge. My daughter Kathleen has severe and life-threatening allergies to eggs, peanuts, and tree nuts, and Julia will not eat fresh fruit; luckily, my son, Marty, will try just about anything. Mothers constantly tell me that they feel guilty about their children's diets; they know how important it is to feed their kids healthy foods, but they're just not sure how to do it. Despite my own background in nutrition, I had to go through some trial and error with my triplets. Here are the most important lessons I've learned, which should help you guide your kids to eat better.

1. **Make a schedule.** Children need to eat every three to four hours: three meals, two snacks, and lots of fluids. If you plan for these, your child's diet will be much more balanced and he'll be less cranky, because he won't be famished. I put a cooler in the car when I'm out with my kids and keep it stocked with carrots, pretzels, yogurt, and water so we don't have to rely on fast food.
2. **Plan dinners.** If thinking about a weekly menu is too daunting, start with two or three days at a time. A good dinner doesn't have to be fancy, but it should be balanced: whole-grain bread, rice, or pasta; a fruit or a vegetable; and a protein source like lean meat, cheese, or beans. I often make simple entree soups or Mexican chili ahead of time and then freeze it; at dinnertime, I heat it up and add whole-grain bread and a bowl of cut-up apples or melon to round out the meal.
3. **Don't become a short-order cook.** A few years ago, I got into a bad habit. I'd make two suppers -- one that I knew the kids would like and one for my husband and me. It was exhausting. Now I prepare one meal for everybody and serve it family-style so the kids can pick and choose what they want. Children often mimic their parents' behavior, so one of these days, they'll eat most of the food I serve them.
4. **Bite your tongue.** As hard as this may be, try not to comment on what or how much your kids are eating. Be as neutral as possible. Remember, you've done your job as a parent by serving balanced meals; your kids are responsible for eating them. If you play food enforcer -- saying things like "Eat your vegetables" -- your child will only resist.
5. **Introduce new foods slowly.** Children are new-food-phobic by nature. I tell my kids that their taste buds sometimes have to get used to a flavor before they'll like the taste. A little hero worship can work wonders too. Marty refused to even try peas until I told him that Michael Jordan eats his to stay big and strong. Now Marty eats peas all the time.
6. **Dip it.** If your kids won't eat vegetables, experiment with dips. Kathleen tried her first vegetable when I served her a thinly cut carrot with some ranch salad dressing. My children also like hummus, salsa, and yogurt-based dressing.
7. **Make mornings count.** Most families don't eat enough fiber on a daily basis, and breakfast is an easy place to sneak it in. I make up batches of whole-grain pancake and waffle batter that last all week. For a batch that serves five, sift together 2 cups whole-wheat pastry flour, 4 tsp. baking powder, 1/2 tsp. salt, and 2 Tbs. sugar. When you're ready to cook, mix in 2 Tbs. ground flax meal, 2 cups water, 3 Tbs. canola oil, 1/4 tsp. vanilla, and 2 Tbs. applesauce.
8. **Sneak in soy.** Even if your kids don't have milk allergies, soy milk is a terrific source of healthy phytochemicals. My kids don't like soy milk but don't notice when it's hidden in a recipe. I use the low-fat, calcium-fortified kind in some recipes that call for milk, such as oatmeal, mashed potatoes, and sauces.
9. **Sprinkle some sugar.** Julia eats her cooked carrots with a bit of brown sugar, and I mix a little root beer into her

prune juice to make prune-juice soda. Kathleen and Marty like a sprinkle of sugar on their fruit. I know that they'll eventually outgrow this need for extra sweetness, but in the meantime, they're eating fruits and vegetables.

10. **Get kids cooking.** If your children become involved in choosing or preparing meals, they'll be more interested in eating what they've created. Take them to the store, and let them choose produce for you. If they're old enough, allow them to cut up vegetables and mix them into a salad. Although Julia refuses to eat fresh fruit, she and I make banana or apple muffins together -- and she always eats them once they're done.
11. **Cut back on junk.** Remember, you -- not your kids -- are in charge of the foods that enter the house. By having fewer junk foods around, you'll force your children to eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products.
12. **Allow treats.** Having less healthy foods occasionally keeps them from becoming forbidden -- and thus even more appealing. We call candy, soda, and cookies "sometimes" foods. I generally buy only healthy cereals such as Cheerios and Raisin Bran, but I let my kids have sugary cereals when they visit their grandparents or when we're on vacation. And I treat them to McDonald's for lunch every so often.
13. **Have fun.** The more creative the meal is, the greater the variety of foods my kids eat. We make smiley-face pancakes and give foods silly names. (Broccoli florets are "baby trees" or "dinosaur food.") Anything mini is always a hit too. I often use cookie cutters to turn toast into hearts and stars, which the children love.
14. **Be a role model.** If you're constantly on a diet or have erratic eating habits, your children will grow up thinking that this sort of behavior is normal. Be honest with yourself about the kinds of food messages you're sending. Trust your body to tell you when you're hungry and when you're full, and your kids will learn to do the same.
15. **Adjust your attitude.** Realize that what your kids eat over time is what matters. Having popcorn at the movies or eating an ice-cream sundae are some of life's real pleasures. As long as you balance these times with smart food choices and physical activity, your children will be fine.

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