

Give Peas a Chance

by Beth Adamo

Learn how you (and your child) can win the daily battle over food.



Remember the old saying, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink”? If you’re a parent, you know how true this is. If only the simple task of feeding your child a healthy meal was actually simple. The reality is that, for many families, it’s become a daily struggle. That’s why we’ve interviewed experts and parents for some straight talk on how to talk to younger children about food.

Children Learn by Doing

Kids love to create and take a personal interest in what they make. "When you involve your child in the process, she's much more likely to eat the final product," says Alicyn Mindel, a nutrition and lifestyle coach. Give your child part of the shopping list and let him help in the kitchen. This can even include growing the food, if you have a vegetable garden. "Discussing where the food comes from before the meal also helps your child feel connected to the food and more likely to eat it," suggests Ms. Mindel. "Fall is such a great time to visit local farms and learn about harvesting and the life cycle of food."



A healthy beginning

In a perfect world, your child would happily eat and enjoy all of the nutritious foods you offer—without any coaxing from you. In reality, no child is agreeable all the time. However, you can increase the chances of raising a healthy eater by giving your child a healthy beginning.

Start by feeding your baby a variety of healthy foods in utero and breastfeed if you can. Breastfeeding exposes your baby to lots of different foods and, very importantly, different tastes—everything mom has eaten on any given day. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, this exposure helps children adapt more readily to new foods and provides a solid foundation for healthy eating as they grow up.

Be a positive role model

Like most things, eating is a learned behavior. First and foremost, your child learns from you—how to eat, what to eat, and how to use food to get your attention. "Eating is a very social event with a strong emotional context," says child psychiatrist Tamara Davis, M.D. "A toddler quickly learns that he can get your attention easier by throwing food on the floor than by quietly eating it," she says. "Instead of reacting to his negative behavior, be sure to encourage his good behavior with lots of praise. Give him a reassuring smile or say, 'Look at that, you ate all your green beans—what a good job you did!'"



Having regular meals together as a family is essential to raising a healthy eater. Start as early as possible by including your baby or toddler at the dinner table. Eating together gives you an opportunity to be a good role model, and provide encouragement and guidance.

Food wars (and peace)

According to Dr. Davis, forcing your child to finish everything on his plate is not a healthy approach because it can actually train your child to overeat. However, getting your child to try a new food or simply eat some of the delicious and nutritious food you've prepared can be a challenge. Here are some tactics for finding peace amidst the food wars:

Try it, try it, you will see...

If your child refuses to try something new, try referencing the popular book *Green Eggs & Ham* by Dr. Seuss. Remind her that the character in the book loved green eggs and ham once he tried them. Be sure to reward her with lots of praise.

Building blocks for the body

Explain how the food helps your child's body to be healthy. "Make it real what the food is doing for your child," says Dr. Davis. "Explain that spinach is good for his muscles, or how the food provides the 'building blocks' he needs to be stronger or to run faster," she says. Use words and concepts your child can understand.

“The biggest challenge with our almost 3-year-old and food is my wife and I agreeing about how to approach it. You have to try to be on the same page so there’s a consistent message...for example, when it comes to sweets and using them as rewards.” –Joe

“I worry about giving ‘junk foods’ too much power by withholding them or using them as rewards. I’m afraid that restricting these snacks too much will only make them want the ‘forbidden foods’ more!” –Laura



“I make careful choices about which foods we eat at home, but I allow my kids to eat the less-than-healthy snacks they’re given at parties or after baseball games because it’s just too hard (socially) not to.” –Karen

“Sometimes, the toughest part is being a good role model when it comes to eating healthy. But it certainly makes a big difference in your kids’ eating habits when you are.” –Bill

It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s superfood!

“It’s also great to introduce the idea of ‘superfoods,’” suggests Alicyn Mindel, a nutrition and lifestyle coach. (If it’s “super,” it must be good, right?) “Superfoods include dark leafy greens, yams, almonds, blueberries, avocado, yogurt, salmon, whole grains, and beans,” says Ms. Mindel. “Since all of these foods are so colorful, you can ask, ‘Did you eat the rainbow today?’ Kids really respond to this idea.”

Healthy vs. unhealthy

Sometimes simply changing the words you use to talk about food can make a big difference. Instead of using “good” or “bad” to describe a food, say it’s “healthy” or “unhealthy.” Talking about food in terms of its nutritional value helps the child learn to distinguish between foods that are “good” for her body vs. foods that simply taste “good” (which may include lots of junk foods, fast foods, and sweets).

Don’t play food games

If you’ve tried everything, and your child still refuses to eat what you’ve prepared, you might be tempted to take the path of least

resistance and make something else. Don’t do it—you are not a short-order cook. “In this kind of power struggle, it’s important to point out that the child always has a choice,” says Dr. Davis. “Calmly explain, ‘This is what we’re having for dinner... If you don’t want to eat this, you don’t have to... It’s your choice,’ and don’t offer an alternate menu.”

“Don’t be afraid to take a stand. But once you do, you have to stick to it—even if that means on rare occasion your child will go to bed hungry because he refuses to eat what you offer,” says Dr. Davis. If you do this in a loving and consistent manner, your child will learn, and the next time will be easier.

Trick or treat?

When faced with an uncooperative eater, you might also be tempted to promise a sweet “treat” as a reward for eating the healthy food on her plate. While this “trick” might seem to work in the short run, it ultimately sends the wrong

message to your child: That the treat is more desirable (and therefore more important) than the healthy food. “Giving praise and positive reinforcement is a much better reward,” says Dr. Davis. On the flip side, you don’t want to completely deprive your child of treats, either, so it’s important to strike the right balance.

Food is not for comfort

It’s also tempting to give your child a snack as a way of keeping him content—in the car, at the store, while watching TV, etc. According to Dr. Davis, this sends the wrong message and can lead to unhealthy eating habits. “When we offer food as a way of comforting, we’re not teaching the child to listen to his body and eat when he’s hungry,” she says.

The bottom line

Like all of us, children need to feel understood. You can validate your child by repeating what she’s saying back to her. Whenever possible, give your child a sense of control over what she eats. And always be honest.

Finally, in the heat of any food battle, it can never hurt to remind your child you’re on her side with a reassuring “I love you.” ■