



How to get your family into veggies and fruit

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Of course you know that eating fruit and vegetables is beneficial for your health. Be it the mediterranean diet, diet designed for a healthy microbiome, general guidelines for a healthy lifestyle or tips how to lose weight in the long run... The summary of every guideline basically states that a high intake of fruit and especially vegetables is key for a balanced lifestyle. A study conducted at University College London even showed that the more fruit and especially the more vegetables you eat, the longer you live (1). But then again, it can be quite difficult to overcome your daily routines and add more fresh food to your menu. Even more difficult, it seems, is to get your family to join you! Research has shown that the kind of food you eat has an effect on both your physical and mental well-being. This is also the case for our little ones, as has been summarized e.g. in this blog by Lisa Boz, M.Sc.: <https://newbrainnutrition.com/tips-how-to-encourage-children-with-neurodevelopmental-disorders-to-live-healthy/>



Many families experience long and tedious fights over the daily food. But that doesn't have to be the case. With the following tips you might get your family - especially your kids - to a higher consumption of fresh fruit and veg, and you all might have fun along the way, too.

1. Let your kids choose between two or more options
2. Let them play with food
3. Give the dish a fancy name
4. Serve a dip with the raw veggies
5. Be a role model
6. Offer veggies again and again
7. Cut fruit and veggies into small pieces or funny shapes
8. Sprinkle fruit with lemon juice for an attractive looking snack
9. Serve pieces of veggies while the main dish is still cooking
10. Delete the notion that kids don't like vegetables
11. Grow it yourself
12. Choose small sized pieces of fruit and veggies
13. Fry it or hide it

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Let your kids choose between two or more options

Why should you be the one to decide whether it just HAS to be spinach? Maybe your kid fancies softly cooked carrots! Give your kids the opportunity to decide for themselves which vegetable they would like to have. You can also plan a tasting event where you go and select different fruits together and then evaluate who likes what.

Let them play with food

Most of us grew up learning that “you should not play with food”. Why not? Let pieces of veggies hop along the table, fall into a tasty dip and jump into the mouth. Your kid likes animals? Great, let’s play bunny! What do bunnies like? Carrots of course - let’s go and munch a few together, hopping on the kitchen floor. You can also make use of the fact that many fruit and veg have bright colors. Start a puzzle or picture with different pieces of fresh food!

Give the dish a fancy name

Children might eat more if the food has an appealing name. So instead of tomato soup, let’s have a volcano adventure today! No more carrot sticks, now it’s time for power bites! If your kid fancies TV or book characters, you can also use these names to create interest in the fresh options. A study by Wansink and colleagues showed that kids eat more vegetables if they are given a name like ‘X-ray vision carrots’ (2).

Serve a dip with the raw veggies

Be honest to yourself - you might prefer your celerie sticks and radish with a nice tip, too. Same with your kids and partner.

Be a role model

Why should your kids eat fresh food if you don’t? Be a role model and show them how much you like your daily fresh bites. Also, don’t act. If you personally don’t like radish, explain that you prefer cucumber. You can also mention that you like having a salad with your meal because then you don’t feel too full afterwards. That way, children understand that different types of food have different effects on our body.

Offer veggies again and again

If your kid refused to eat broccoli in the past, don’t jump to the conclusion that “it just doesn’t like broccoli”. Be curious and see whether it likes it in the future. Offer a bite whenever you cook it. Don’t be disappointed when it is rejected. Maybe you just haven’t found the right recipe yet.

Cut fruit and veg into small pieces or funny shapes

Small pieces that easily fit into the mouth may be more appealing than a large piece of fruit. A colleague of mine told me that his children started to eat more raw vegetables like carrots, garden radish and cucumber since he has started to build little racing cars with the food.

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Sprinkle fruit with lemon juice for an attractive looking snack

Fruit like apple or banana pieces can quickly turn brown. If you sprinkle them with lemon juice, they look appealing for a longer time. Plus, many children like the little extra taste.

Serve pieces of veggies while the main dish is still cooking

If you gather your family around the table when dinner is just about ready, this is the perfect time to sneak in a little extra vitamin boost. Have a plate with small pieces of vegetable in the middle of the table and don't lose a word about it. If your loved ones are hungry, they can start nibbling until you serve the main dish.

Delete the notion that kids don't like vegetables

Just don't make too much a fuss about the importance of eating vegetables. Instead, get accustomed to the notion that it is something that belongs to everyday life. For you and your family. A short while ago, I sat with three colleagues (all psychologists and all mothers) and one of them was serving her kid a bit of her veggie stir-fry. The other one said "This is something my kids would never eat." I am asking you: What did the little boy draw from that? That it's unnatural for him to like that kind of food. So please just don't comment on every bit of fruit or veg that your kids eat. Also, instead of saying "My kid doesn't like cauliflower." please say "My kid likes cauliflower best with a creamy sauce." - even if this has been the only single time he or she has ever given in and tried one single bite.



Grow it yourself

I personally find it absolutely fascinating to watch my plants grow fruit. If you show your kids how their fruit and veg are developing, they might appreciate them more and be curious what you can cook with them. Some plants are specially designed for gardening with the little ones. They have cute names like "red marbles" (cherry tomatoes) or "rabbit's favourite" (small carrots). Plus, gardening is a great opportunity for kids to get dirty. :-)

Choose small sized pieces of fruit and veg

Imagine how big a regular sized apple must look like for a kid. Something like a cantaloupe maybe? Why not starting small and choosing fun-sized pieces? Some smaller tomato variants are also available, and they usually are sweeter than the ones we are used to.

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Fry it or hide it

If you really experience that your kid rejects all the offers you try, this is the final tip. Blend a handful of vegetables and secretly add them to whatever you are cooking, like sauces or soups. For a sweeter taste you can experiment with blended fruit instead of sugar or honey. Some kids might be up for a smoothie. Frying pieces of veg could be another compromise. So how about a pakora party? For pakora, you simply dip different pieces of veg into a chickpea dough and fry them. And who could argue over fried food?



References

- <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2014/apr/ucl-study-finds-new-evidence-linking-fruit-and-vegetable-consumption-lower-mortality>
- Brian Wansink, David R. Just, Collin R. Payne, Matthew Z. Klinger (2012) RETRACTED: Attractive names sustain increased vegetable intake in schools. Preventive Medicine, Volume 55, Issue 4, October 2012, Pages 330-332 (Note: This study has been retracted due to some mistakes in data reporting. From my perspective, the study's conclusion remains valid.)

About the author

Anne Siegl, PhD is a psychologist and neuroscientist at Klinik für Psychiatrie, Psychosomatik und Psychotherapie Universitätsklinikum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. She is researching effects of nutrition on psychological well-being and, being no friend to prohibition of certain food items, is especially interested in the effect of a balanced diet on mental health. Follow her on instagram for more scientifically sound information on food: @futter_liebe (available in English and German).