

Just one bite...doesn't really work

As parents and educators we are intent on getting children to eat a wide variety of food. And with good reason! The child who readily accepts and eats the food we so carefully choose and prepare for them has a better chance of eating healthfully. **So, how can you help children become more adventurous eaters?**

Pressure doesn't work in the long run. It's tempting to fall into the "just one bite" approach. We implore children to take just one bite, urging them on with logic, "How do you know you don't like it if you won't even try it..." Or, how about the parallel strategy of "Finish your vegetables, then you can have dessert." We think we have to urge children on and focus their attention to get them to eat well. However, research and experience shows that this sort of pressure doesn't work in the long run. When children experience pressure, especially those children who are "picky" and perhaps more reluctant to try to new things, they will try to take control over the situation by refusing to eat.

Positive experiences with food, including cooking really work. What does work? Building up a set of positive experiences to make a child familiar and comfortable with the food. Read a story about the food. Have them help you at the supermarket by picking up the food and putting it into the shopping cart. Have them help prepare the food by washing a vegetable or mixing ingredients. Engaging children in food preparation is one of the best ways to help them overcome their reluctance to try new foods. It may take up to ten exposures to a food before a child feels comfortable enough to taste a food. If you continue to serve a variety of foods and set the example by eating the food yourself, eventually children will come around to eating it themselves. **"Do as I do" has more power than "do as I say".**

When your picky eater finally does take a taste, don't make a big deal about it. This is perceived as a form of pressure, and as we've already mentioned, pressure doesn't work. Research shows that children who are rewarded for tasting a food are actually less likely to go back to it than children who are simply exposed to it and allowed to decide on their own whether or not to eat it.

Check out some of the recipes at bcdairy.ca to engage young learners in some new food adventures.

References

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The sticky problem of using food as a reward

“Eat your peas and then you can have dessert.”

“If you are good today, you can have ice cream.”

Have you found yourself encouraging a reluctant young eater to finish their vegetables by promising dessert as a reward? Or using food as a bribe to encourage good behaviour? So many of us resort to these tactics because they work—in the short run. But before you do it next time, consider this: Research shows that **using food as a reward can have many negative consequences** that go far beyond the short-term benefits of good behaviour or performance.

You are actually teaching children to develop a preference for the sweet foods that are typically used for rewards. This interferes with eating in response to hunger. It encourages over-eating, and can lead to lifetime problems with responding properly to hunger and fullness cues. In addition, when you are using a sweet food as a reward for another food, you end up teaching children to avoid the less preferred food even more.

More appropriate rewards might include non-food prizes like stickers and tattoos, or privileges such as sitting next to a friend, playing with a special toy, or extra screen time.

References

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