

# Raising Healthy Children: Introducing New Foods to Your Preschooler<sup>1</sup>

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Childhood obesity is on the rise. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of preschoolers who are obese doubled from 1976–2000. Teaching children to eat a variety of nutritious foods can play an important role in helping them develop good eating habits that promote good health, including a healthy body weight. This publication will discuss different ways to encourage children to try and accept new foods.



## Variety is Key!

One of the main messages of *MyPyramid for Preschoolers* is variety, which is represented by the different colored bands on the pyramid. The five food groups include Grains (orange band), Vegetables (green band), Fruits (red band), Milk (blue band) and Meat and Beans (purple band).



Nutrients found in one group may not be present in high amounts in another—that's why variety is important. Eating a variety of foods from all of the food groups helps preschoolers meet their needs for different nutrients. Learning to eat

different foods within each food group is not only healthy, but it can also be an exciting adventure.

Some preschoolers prefer eating the same foods every day. This is called a food jag and is common in this age group. Although food jags can be frustrating for parents, children do outgrow them. If the foods of choice are nutritious, continue to offer them along with other foods. Eventually your child will try other foods and learn to enjoy them. If you are concerned with your child's diet, talk to your pediatrician or family doctor and follow the



recommendations in this publication. The best way to encourage your preschooler to try new foods is to have them available. Above all, avoid power struggles. It can take up to 12 times of offering a new food before a young child will try it, so be patient. Getting upset will just make you and your child more frustrated.

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## Provide a Pleasant Environment

A child's eating environment may influence whether or not they will try new foods, so make mealtimes as pleasant and positive as you can. When eating dinner, turn off the TV so she is not distracted. Spend quality time talking with your child. This is a great opportunity to talk about the importance of trying new, healthy foods.



Offer new, healthy options and make sure she sees you eating these foods too. It may be necessary for you to evaluate the quality of your current diet and food choices in order to improve the health of your family. Serving new, healthy foods is not only great for your preschooler, but doing so will benefit the entire family!

Generally, children who are unwilling to try new foods have lower intakes of fruits and vegetables. But the good news is that repeated exposure to new foods often can lead to children trying them! Remember, it can take up to 12 times of offering a food before the child even tastes it. The important thing to remember is not to give up. Focus on introducing new, healthy foods to your preschooler, and then let her\* decide when to try them.



## Tips to Get Your Child to Try New Foods

Although every child is different, following some simple suggestions may increase the likelihood that your child will try and enjoy new healthy foods. Try the following suggestions and see how they work for you:

- Make them more available. Keep healthy foods in areas children can easily reach and in sizes, shapes, and textures that are right for their age. Examples include cut-up fruits, like apples and grapes (sliced vertically to

avoid choking), or vegetables, like celery and carrot sticks.

- Model good behavior. Kids tend to eat the same foods and in the same manner as their parents. Let your child see you enjoying healthy foods and trying new foods.



- Make positive comments about new foods at meal times. Giving foods fun names has been shown to increase the amount that kids will eat.
- Let your child pick out new healthy foods at the grocery store. Children are more likely to try a food if they are the ones to select it.
- Eat more meals as a family. Eating together in a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere (no TV!) will likely increase the number of healthy foods your child will eat.

## Summary

Introducing new foods to preschoolers takes time and patience. Showing your child that you like the food, telling her about the food and giving her a lot of chances to get familiar with new foods can help make feeding more relaxing for you and your preschooler.

To get more information about feeding your preschooler, contact one of the following reliable sources in your county:

- Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book.) Florida Extension offices are listed online by UF/IFAS at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu> or <http://SolutionsForYourLife.com/map>.
- WIC nutritionist at your county Health Department (also in the blue pages of your telephone book).

For referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area you can call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850 or check the yellow pages of your phone book.

*\*Although we refer to a female child in this document, the recommendations apply to all children.*

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### Recommended Reading

Patrick, H., and Nicklas, TA. A review of family and social determinants of children's eating patterns and diet quality. *J Am Coll Nutr* 2005; 24:83–92.

Moore, S.N., Tapper, K., and Murphy, S. Feeding strategies used by mothers of 3–5-year-old children. *Appetite J Nutr* 2007; 49:704–707.

Satter, E. *Childhood Feeding Problems: The Picky Eater*. Ellen Satter Associates 2009. Available at: <http://ellyn.com/showArticle.jsp?id=265&section=278>. Accessed on August 29, 2009.

Satter, E. *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Third Edition. Palo Alto: Bull Publishing Company, (2000). ISBN: 0-92352-151-8

Satter, E. *How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much*. Boulder: Bull Publishing Company, (1987) ISBN: 0-915959-83-9

### Recommended Web Sites

U.S. Department of Agriculture – *MyPyramid.gov* – *Inside the pyramid: Trying new foods*. This site contains information about nutrition, healthy eating habits, and gives you other resources to improve health and nutrition. <http://www.mypyramid.gov/preschoolers/HealthyHabits/PickyEaters/newfoods.html>

*Ellyn Satter Associates* – *Childhood Feeding problems*. This site is great for families with young children. In addition to the valuable resources pertaining to childhood development, she dedicates a whole section of her Web page to guidance on how to feed children. <http://ellynsatter.com/children.jsp>