Getting Your Preschooler to Eat Fruits and Vegetables: Tips for Parents of Children Ages 3 to 5

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Many parents struggle with getting their preschool age children (3 to 5 years of age) to eat fruits and vegetables, or having them try a fruit or vegetable that is new to them or prepared in a new way. Reluctance to eat certain foods or try new foods may be a way for children to express some control over at least this one small part of their lives. As with other aspects of parenting, it’s important not to turn the situation into a power struggle. Rather, it is best to be patient and realize that it may take many attempts before a child will try a new fruit or vegetable, or go back to eating a fruit or vegetable they claim not to like. Some basic suggestions are to continue to offer a variety of fruits and vegetables, eat fruits and vegetables yourself, and allow your children to participate in selecting and preparing fruits and vegetables for them to eat. Below are a few tips to encourage your children to eat fruits and vegetables, some things to avoid doing, and a few strategies you might choose to employ.

Do More of This:

- Praise your children when they eat fruits and vegetables, even if they just try a small bite. You could say something like, “I’m proud of you for trying a little bite of that strawberry!”
- Encourage your children to eat fruits and vegetables by offering a variety at lunch, dinner, snack, and even as a dessert.
- Serve unfamiliar fruits or vegetables with familiar ones and let your children know what the new fruit or vegetable will feel like and taste like. For example you might serve kiwi fruit with strawberries.
- Allow your children to smell or feel the new fruit or vegetable even if they don’t eat it. This isn’t “playing with food,” but rather allowing your child to explore food through their senses.
- Offer new fruits and vegetables frequently. It may take ten or more times before a child will try a new food.
- Eat together as a family and let your children see you eating fruits and vegetables.
- Make fruits and vegetables easy to eat by slicing or pealing them, making them bit-size, and easy to reach as well.
- Let your children choose which fruits and vegetables to eat and allow them to serve themselves.
- Let your children participate in shopping for fruits and vegetables and helping to select which ones to purchase.
- Let your children help prepare the fruits and vegetables such as allowing them to wash, chop, or mix vegetables.

Do Less of This:

- Don’t become a “short-order cook,” preparing a different meal for each child.
- Don’t beg or plead with your children to eat fruits and vegetables.
- Don’t make your children feel guilty or yell at them for not eating fruits and vegetables.
- Don’t make your children sit at the table until they finish their fruits and vegetables.
- Don’t reward your children with sweets for eating fruits and vegetables.
- Don’t tell your children that they will get a stomach ache if they eat too many sweets.
- Don’t tell your children to eat fruits and vegetables, but not eat them yourself.
A Few Strategies to Try Out:

▪ Get your children involved in deciding which fruits and vegetables to buy at the grocery store by having them cut out pictures from the grocery store advertisements.

▪ Start a small vegetable garden in your yard or in containers on your porch and have your child help tend the garden—including picking the vegetable when it is ripe.

▪ Reduce distractions by turning off the television during meals.

▪ Demonstrate through your own behavior that you enjoy eating fruits and vegetables.

▪ Be persistent and creative by offering fruits and vegetables prepared in different ways such as raw, grilled, or in fun shapes.

References:


