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6 Food Mistakes Parents Make

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

HARRIET WOROBEY, a childhood [nutrition](#) instructor, knows firsthand that children can be picky eaters, but even she was surprised by a preschooler last year who ate a mostly [chocolate](#) diet.

“Chocolate milk, chocolate chip muffins, chocolate chip pancakes — it was unbelievable,” said Ms. Worobey, director of the [Rutgers University](#) Nutritional Sciences Preschool in New Brunswick, N.J. “His mother just thought, ‘That’s what he wants, so that’s what I’m going to do.’”

While most parents haven’t resorted to the chocolate diet, they can relate to the daily challenge of finding foods that children will eat. Although [obesity](#) dominates the national discussion on childhood health, many parents are also worried that their child’s preferred diet of nuggets and noodles could lead to a nutritional deficit.

Fussiness about food is a normal part of a child’s development. Young children are naturally neophobic — they have a distrust of the new. Even the most determined parents can be cowed by a child’s resolve to eat nothing rather than try something new. As a result, parents often give in, deciding that a bowl of Cocoa Puffs or a Pop-Tart, while not ideal, must be better than no food at all.

“I think parents feel like it’s their job to just make their children eat something,” Ms. Worobey said. “But it’s really their job to serve a variety of healthy foods and get their children exposed to foods.”

A series of simple meal-time strategies can help even the pickiest eater learn to like a more varied diet. Here’s a look at six common mistakes parents make when feeding their children.

Sending children out of the kitchen With hot stoves, boiling water and sharp knives at hand, it is understandable that parents don’t want children in the kitchen when they’re making dinner. But studies suggest that involving children in meal preparation is an important first step in getting them to try new foods.

Researchers at Teachers College at [Columbia University](#) studied how cooking with a child affects the child’s eating habits. In one study, nearly 600 children from kindergarten to sixth grade took part in a nutrition curriculum intended to get them to eat more vegetables and whole grains. Some children, in addition to having lessons about healthful eating, took part in cooking workshops. The researchers found that children who had cooked their own foods were more likely to eat those foods in the cafeteria, and even ask for seconds, than children who had not had the cooking class.

When children are involved in meal preparation, “they come to at least try the food,” said Isobel Contento, professor of nutrition education at Teachers College and a co-author of the study. “Kids don’t usually like radishes, but we found that if kids cut up radishes and put them in the salad, they love the radishes.”

Pressuring them to take a bite Demanding that a child eat at least one bite of everything seems reasonable, but it’s likely to backfire.

Studies show that children react negatively when parents pressure them to eat foods, even if the pressure offers a reward. In one study at [Pennsylvania State University](#), researchers asked children to eat vegetables and drink milk, offering them stickers and television time if they did. Later in the study, the children expressed dislike for the foods they had been rewarded for eating.

“Parents say things like ‘eat your vegetables and you can watch TV,’ but we know that kind of thing doesn’t work either,” said Leann L. Birch, director of Penn State’s childhood obesity research center and a co-author of the study. “In the short run, you might be able to coerce a child to eat, but in the long run, they will be less likely to eat those foods.”

The better approach is to put the food on the table and encourage a child to try it. But don’t complain if she refuses, and don’t offer praise if she tastes it. Just ask her if she wants some more or take seconds yourself, but try to stay neutral.

Keeping ‘good stuff’ out of reach Parents worry that children will binge on treats, so they often put them out of sight or on a high shelf. But a large body of research shows that if a parent restricts a food, children just want it more.

In another Penn State study, researchers experimented to determine whether forbidden foods were more desirable. Children were seated at tables and given unlimited access to plates of apple or peach cookie bars — two foods the youngsters had rated as “just O.K.” in earlier taste tests. With another group, some bars were served on plates, while some were placed in a clear cookie jar in the middle of the table. The children were told that after 10 minutes, they could snack on [cookies](#) from the jar.

The researchers found that restricting the cookies had a profound effect: consumption more than tripled compared with when the cookies were served on plates.

Other studies show that children whose food is highly restricted at home are far more likely to binge when they have access to forbidden foods.

The lesson for parents? Don’t bring foods that you feel the need to restrict into the house. Instead, buy healthful snacks and give children free access to the food cabinets.

Dieting in front of your children Kids are tuned into their parents’ eating preferences and are far more likely to try foods if they see their mother or father eating them. A Rutgers study of parent and child food preferences found that preschoolers tended to like or reject the same fruits and vegetables their parents liked or didn’t like. And other research has shown girls are more likely to be picky eaters if their mothers don’t like vegetables.

Given this powerful effect, parents who are trying to lose weight should be aware of how their dieting habits can influence a child’s perceptions about food and healthful eating. In one study of 5-year-old girls, one child noted that dieting involved drinking chocolate milkshakes — her mother was using Slim-Fast drinks. Another child said dieting meant “you fix food but you don’t eat it.”

A 2005 report in the journal *Health Psychology* found that mothers who were preoccupied with their weight and eating were more likely to restrict foods for their daughters or encourage them to lose weight. Daughters of dieters were also more likely to try diets as well. The problem is, restrictive diets don’t work for most people and often lead to [binge eating](#) and weight gain. By exposing young children to erratic dieting habits, parents may be putting them at risk for [eating disorders](#) or a lifetime of chronic dieting. “Most mothers don’t think their kids are soaking up this information, but they are,” Dr. Birch said. “They’re teaching it to their daughters even though it doesn’t work for them.”

Serving boring vegetables Calorie-counting parents often serve plain steamed vegetables, so it’s no wonder children are reluctant to eat them. Nutritionists say parents shouldn’t be afraid to dress up the vegetables. Adding a little butter, ranch dressing, cheese sauce or brown sugar to a vegetable dish can significantly improve its kid appeal. And adding a little fat to vegetables helps unlock their fat-soluble nutrients. The few extra [calories](#) you’re adding are a worthwhile tradeoff for the nutritional boost and the chance to introduce a child to a vegetable.

Giving up too soon Ms. Worobey said she has often heard parents say, “My kid would never eat that.” While it may be true right now, she noted that eating preferences often change. So parents should keep preparing a variety of healthful foods and putting them on the table, even if a child refuses to take a bite. In young children, it may take 10 or more attempts over several months to introduce a food.

Sibling dynamics and friendships can also change a child’s eating habits. Dr. Birch of Penn State noted that her first child was always willing to try new foods, but that her second child was not. “Part of it was just him defining his place in the family,” she said. By the age of 10 or 11, he didn’t want to be outdone by his sister and was far more willing to try new foods.

Susan B. Roberts, a [Tufts University](#) nutritionist and co-author of the book “Feeding Your Child for Lifelong Health,” suggested a “rule of 15” — putting a food on the table at least 15 times to see if a child will accept it. Once a food is accepted, parents should use “food bridges,” finding similarly colored or flavored foods to expand the variety of foods a child will eat. If a child likes pumpkin pie, for instance, try mashed sweet potatoes and then mashed carrots. If a child loves corn, try mixing in a few peas or carrots. Even if a child picks them out, the exposure to the new food is what counts.

“As parents, you’re going to make decisions as to what you want to serve,” Ms. Worobey said. “But then you just have to relax and realize children are different from day to day.”