

## TRAINING TASTEBUDS FOR HEALTHY EATING

When I was a kid, I didn't like to eat eggs. I used to hide them in flowerpots. (The flowers bloomed beautifully – I should have taken this as a hint!) But my distaste for eggs would disappear instantly if my Mom asked me to bake with her. I remember I used to fight over the cake batter with my sister, so Mom had to split the chocolate cake batter into two equal parts. Those were sweet childhood memories, but unfortunately full of high saturated fat-filled treats. (I hope my mom does not read this article, otherwise she will definitely suffer a dose of mother's guilt.) After studies later proved that Girl Scout Cookies and other sugary treats with high trans-fat levels were not healthy, manufacturers made drastic changes to the food production process - specifically the fat content. Of course, so did the Girl Scout Cookie Company!

The trick of food acceptance is reversing your child's mindset. I knew that if I ate my hardboiled egg for breakfast I could get my treat! I had to bear the BAD FOOD (EGGS) so I could get the GOOD FOOD (COOKIES). It's an unfortunate reward system that we all know works. But how could I learn to actually like the eggs?

- **Take it easy.** Pushing your child to eat vegetables almost always backfires. The result is that children will learn to dislike vegetables, and see them as something you eat only if forced, or if you just want to get at the cupcake or cookie that was offered as a bribe. Instead, offer kids the option of spitting out the food if they don't like it. If they've gotten used to the idea of a particular veggie on their plate, odds are that over time they'll eat it. It's a visual thing!

You certainly might need to strategize. Not only will mealtime be less of a struggle, you'll actually break free of the grilled cheese sandwich rut.

- **Teach don't preach.** Seek out kids' books that explain good nutrition. One to try: *Eat Healthy, Feel Great* (Little, Brown & Co., 2002). You can use it when reading to your preschooler. Now, you might think that by grade school kids are set in their ways. Parents, there's still hope! I read this book to my children at home, and they were telling me which foods were "grow" (good) foods and which ones weren't.
- **Set a good example.** Check out your own eating habits first. The most important thing you can do is to eat a wide variety of vegetables yourself without begging, pleading or even talking about it. Eventually, you'll have a healthy eater on your hands.
- **Get cooking.** Even young children can roll up their own wraps or smear peanut butter on bread—and don't worry about the mess. They're all too happy to serve as chefs and help you out when you're cooking. So ask your 3-year-old to pass the sweet potatoes, or show him how to mix something up in a bowl. (Just make sure the mixture doesn't contain raw egg, which could make your child sick if it ends up on his hands, and in turn, in his mouth.)
- **Give them some control.** How many times have you found yourself negotiating with your kids to put back that box of cookies when shopping at the grocery store? To avoid a supermarket scene, think up fun games to keep your sanity intact and to get your young child interested in better food. For example, when you're in the produce section, ask your kid to help you pick out the prettiest apple. Ask her, "Which one is the reddest?" Or, simply pick a color, like green, and have your kid pick out all the veggies he sees in that color.
- **Get your kids involved.** Whether it's letting your toddler pick out that ultraviolet kale that caught her eye in the produce aisle, or encouraging your 7-year-old to nurture your backyard tomato vine, getting your kids involved in choosing, growing or cooking the family's vegetables is always a good idea. "Getting kids to participate is empowering for them," says American Dietetic Association spokesperson Patricia Vasconcellos, "and gives them choice and control over what they eat." Kids will be proud of what they've

accomplished in the kitchen, and the more they're involved in the selection and cooking process, the more excited they'll be about whatever is on their plate.

Last but not the least; my most challenging group of patients are the teens with poor eating habits. As with the earlier age groups, obesity during adolescence affects blood pressure, blood lipids, lipoprotein, and insulin levels. Perhaps the most widespread consequence of teen obesity is psychological, resulting from discrimination. This is the group parents will need to seek professional help for – and can lead to many types of eating disorders, from anorexia to bulimia. It is very important to partner with a teen rather than critiquing them. We need to take the responsibility to help them get on the right track - even during the holidays, when family gatherings expose us to a multitude of extra calories and fat. Make it a family effort to eat healthy on a daily basis - even when temptations sway us over the holiday season. If we train our children's taste buds early, healthy eating and good nutrition will continue for a lifetime.

My staff at the Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville and I wish you a happy, healthy and delicious Holiday Season.

Dr. O