



Creating safe spaces to explore new foods

Trying new things can be scary or uncomfortable. The same goes for trying new or different foods. Children can have strong reactions to new foods – refusing to eat, crying, tantrums, or even gagging. Creating a safe and positive experience at snacks and meals can help ease these strong reactions and support your child in trying new, healthy foods.

Keep foods separate. You may have heard advice to hide veggies in other foods. This can support a small increase in the variety and overall intake of vegetables. But the small benefit does not necessarily outweigh the cost. Children can feel tricked by this approach and further dislike specific types of food. They are not directly exposed to the taste or texture of a food and may not be able to learn to like it.

Dishes that contain many ingredients, like a casserole or one-pot meal, can be overwhelming. Instead, plate foods separately, keep space between foods, and serve sauces or dips on the side. This allows children to see more easily what is available in the meal and gives them control over what and how much they choose to eat.

Include familiar foods. One new food brings many new sensory experiences. The sight, smell, texture, sound, and flavor of the food may be different than what they are used to. Only introduce one new food at a time and pair it with other healthy foods they like or are familiar with. This can help children feel more comfortable to try the new food.

Keep portions small. Let familiar or favorite foods take up most of the space on the plate. Smaller portions of new or less favorite foods will make it less of a big deal. Encourage your child to give the new food a try. But remind them, and yourself, that it is OK to pass. They may need to see something on their plate several times before they are willing to give it a try.

Let the food be the highlight on the plate. A colorful meal can encourage children to eat more variety. Fun plates and utensils may be helpful to encourage trying new foods for some children. But a colorful meal on a colorful or cartoon plate could be visually overstimulating for others. Try serving colorful meals on neutral or plain color plates. Utensils, rather than eating with hands, may help children who do not like to touch food.

Explore through play. Children learn through play. This includes food. Allowing them to learn about food textures, smells, and tastes through play can get them more comfortable with the idea of eating it. Who can crunch the snap pea the loudest? You could also try creating a sensory bin

of non-food items that have similar textures to food or play kitchen items of healthy foods you are introducing to children.

Explore through conversation. With older children, talk about how senses experience a food. Ask them questions and share your experiences. What does this food feel like? What sound does it make when you bite or chew?

Small changes over time. Children may need to see and explore a food 10 to 15 times before they are willing to try it, much less like it. You can ease small changes by branching out to foods that have similar flavor or texture profiles as their favorite or tolerated foods.

If these tips do not help, your child gags with new foods, or eats fewer than 10 foods, reach out to your child's health-care provider. Some children have sensory processing issues that make it difficult to process and respond to information from the senses. This affects children's behavior and development, including eating and feeding behaviors. Working with health-care and mental health professionals can create a personalized plan and improve behavior.

References

Zelman, K. (2014, August 26). *Picky vs. problem eater: A closer look at sensory processing disorder*. Food & Nutrition. Accessed October 16, 2021

at <https://foodandnutrition.org/september-october-2014/picky-vs-problem-eater-closer-look-sensory-processing-disorder/>

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