

Healthy Eating Research

We have based the content of this section of the site on research conducted at University College London and presented at the international Food in Action conference in 2007 in collaboration with EUFIC (the European Food Information Council). You can hear and see the full presentation at www.eufic.org/index/it/. Visit the webcasts for the conference. In summary, here are a few basic facts about children and food:

1. It was found that children like (and are therefore likely to choose) sweet, crispy, crunchy, colourful and juicy bite-sized foods
2. They tend to dislike (and are therefore less likely to choose) large leafy foods like cabbage and lettuce, and foods with 'bits' in them (eg pips and seeds), watery foods like melon or marrow, slimy foods like mushrooms, mushy or soggy foods, sour or bitter tastes – and new things...
3. Children learn their food preferences through familiarity and therefore may have to encouraged to try new foods, and
4. Learned food preferences take time. Research shows that it takes between 10 and 15 tastes before a 'dislike' begins to change to a 'like'.

To be useful in a practical sense, this information means you could try to:

1. Make food look colourful and attractive
2. Demonstrate good eating behaviour by eating as a family as often as possible to demonstrate good mealtime behaviour
3. Encourage children to try new foods. Avoid pressurising children – tasting a tiny portion is good enough in the first instance, and if a child doesn't like the taste or texture of a food on first trying it, s/he should be allowed to spit it out
4. Expose children to new foods repeatedly – fruits and vegetables that contain the nutrients they need – and in a range of ways
5. Introduce new foods in tiny portions, increasing them only gradually as the child begins to accept them.

Some advice on children's nutrition suggests that you could 'hide' vegetables in your cooking. This isn't ideal as children will not become familiar with them and may always treat them as something

to be avoided. However, where children repeatedly refuse to eat any fruit and vegetables, even after repeated presentation, blending them into soups and stews, or otherwise disguising them may be the only way to add them to a diet. In the kitchen area of the Tesco Great School Run website you will find ideas for ways of doing this. We recommend, however, that you continue to serve vegetables so that they are visible on the plate.

Other advice sometimes includes bribery (and, yes, we've all been there) but this simply reinforces likes and dislikes and, again, does nothing to change values and behaviour over time.

Similarly, overtly rationing consumption of certain foods (such as those high in fat and sugar) as a way of managing a child's nutrition may be counter-productive as s/he is likely to choose rationed foods when you're not around and often in greater quantities than would normally be the case.

In the kitchen area of the Tesco Great School Run site, we present ideas and recipes that help you to follow the above simple guidelines. We've suggested starting with the sweet and crispy, crunchy vegetables children are likely to go for first, with eating ideas that allow for very small quantities that can be increased gradually over time. And we've included foods for the whole family so that parents can lead by good example.