



EAT YOUR GREENS!

3 common mistakes
parents make getting
kids to eat veggies

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Why I wrote this book

My name is Jenny Boss. I'm a parent, a nutritionist, and a writer. I came to nutrition later in life, and have learnt so much about what and how to feed children that I wish I'd known when my boys were younger. And I want to share that knowledge with you.

We know vegetables are good for our kids, but if there's one food they will refuse to eat, it's the green stuff. This book condenses what I've learned from experts about the best approach for a child who refuses to eat vegetables.



My qualifications

I have a Master's Degree in Human Nutrition from Deakin University, and have done extensive specialised training in children's eating and nutrition with:

- Elyn Satter a leading paediatric dietitian and author of *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*
- Gillian Griffiths and Dr Denise Stapleton, authors of *Sensational Mealtimes*
- Dr Kay Toomey and Dr Erin Ross - SOS Approach to picky eating and problem feeding
- Jill Castle, paediatric dietitian and co-author of *Fearless Feeding*.

I hope after reading Eat Your Greens! your mealtimes are just that little bit easier.

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NUTRITION

Eat Your Greens!

3 common mistakes we all make to get our kids eating vegetables , and what you can do instead



“I do all the right things. I prepare vegetables every day for dinner, put them in her lunch box, even serve them at breakfast. But she won't touch them, and I'm worried she's not getting enough nutrition,” says Fran, mum to 8-year-old Holly.

Fran's not alone in her concerns. As a parent it's easy to feel under fire. You read about childhood obesity, you know children need plenty of fruit and vegetables every day, and you want to do your best to get healthy food into your children.

So you do all the right things. You buy the freshest vegetables, prepare them lovingly and serve them up. Only to be faced with a pained expression (at best), or 'yuk', 'revolting,' and 'I'm not eating that.' The vegetables slowly wilt on the plate, and your guilt sets in.

Many of us know **WHAT** we should be feeding our kids. Where we stumble is actually the hardest part – **HOW** to get those vegetables from the fridge into our children's tummies.

Even with the best intentions, some of the tricks and strategies we try can backfire. But the good news is there are some surprisingly simple things you can do to reduce the stress around serving vegetables.

Here are 3 of the most common mistakes we make, and what we can do instead.

Common mistake number 1: Pushing kids to clean their plates

“My parents insisted that I finished everything on my plate,” says Fran. “I guess I do the same thing with Holly. I hate wasting food and need to make sure Holly gets sufficient nourishment, so it makes sense to me to make sure she eats all her dinner.”

Are you also a member of the clean plate club? Maybe you're used to finishing everything on your plate, and have passed this habit on to your own children. It's understandable if, like Fran, you want your child to eat well and not to waste any food.

But think for a moment about how different our food environment is to that of our parents and grandparents.

We live in a time of food abundance, with easy accessibility to all types of food. Eating more than we're hungry for is so easy to do, but may lead to increased weight. But there are ways to teach our kids to recognise hunger and fullness and eat accordingly.



What happens when you expect a clean plate

1. She may learn to finish her food to please you, rather than because she's still hungry. It's normal for a child's appetite to vary from day to day, and week to week. One day she may happily finish all her food, the next day feel full after eating only half of it.

If your child tells you that she's full, but you find the clean plate club member in you cajoling her to finish, she may miss that important fullness cue.

2. Your child is going to grow very weary of 'healthy foods' if she feels she always has to finish them when she doesn't feel like it.

3. Insisting on a clean plate can lead to conflict at mealtimes.

"I remember sitting in front of a plate of Brussels sprouts," says Fran. "I sat there for two hours before my parents gave in and took them away. I have to say, I still don't like sprouts!"

A compliant, easy-going child may finish his plate of vegetables, but a more resistant one like Fran will battle on – for hours. Sound familiar? Conflict like this is stressful for parents, as well as children. Research also shows eating foods you dislike can suppress appetite, and even reduce the amount of nutrients we absorb from food.



Try this instead

Take the pressure off yourself to get your kids to eat veggies. It's normal for children to be slow to like vegetables. Here are three quick tips for creating a positive view of healthy foods and reducing the stress around mealtimes.

1. Rather than plating up your child's dinner, present the food on the table 'family style': have bowls of food on the table, and allow everyone to help themselves.

2. Always have something familiar on the table so your child isn't faced with entirely unfamiliar foods. Have you ever been in a foreign country, looking at a table of food, desperately searching for something familiar? Once you see something you know, the rest of the food isn't so intimidating. Children feel this way too, particularly if they tend to be anxious about trying new foods.

So put bread and butter, rice or pasta on the table, have corn or cherry tomatoes if they are favourite foods, and expose children to less familiar food by placing them on the table too.

3. Don't pressure your child to eat if he doesn't want to, but remind him to say 'no thank you' rather than 'yuck!' If you really think he hasn't eaten enough, let him know that the next eating opportunity won't be until a snack before bed, or breakfast the next morning (depending on your child's age). Then leave it up to him to either continue eating, or to wait until the next meal.

4. Include fruit on the dinner table as well as vegetables. Children may start by eating fruit, such as strawberries, kiwi, and apple, then move on to vegetables.

The good news about fruit

Fran worries about Holly, because vegetables seem to be such an important part of a child's diet. And it's true that in an ideal world we'd love our children to enthusiastically gobble up their vegetables.

But guess what? All plant foods – that's fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds and grains – provide important nutrients children need, such as dietary fibre, potassium, magnesium, B vitamins, vitamin C, vitamin A, and folate (folic acid), so a variety of fruit can go a long way to meeting your child's nutrient needs.

You don't have to treat fruit only as a dessert or snack food. Chopped apples, orange segments, sliced kiwi fruit and watermelon can all make an appearance on the dinner table too, alongside vegetables.

"A variety of fruit can go a long way to meeting your child's nutrient needs."

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Common mistake number 2: Rewarding with desired food

“One way I can get Holly to eat vegetables is by promising her dessert if she eats her beans. It works every time, as she just loves ice cream!” says Fran.

We’ve all done this, because it works. There's no harm done if you do it every so often. But regularly rewarding with desired foods only works in the short term. Here’s why:



1. It places dessert as a food of high value – a trophy to be earned – while teaching kids to dislike the target food – vegetables.

The message, in effect, is: “I know vegetables are really horrible, which is why I need to bribe you with something as delicious as ice cream.”

2. When we regularly reward our child for eating certain foods, she may end up eating to please her parents, rather than because the food tastes good.

By the time our children are teenagers, our influence as parents has worn a bit thin. Teenagers are less likely to eat their veggies to get dessert, because now they have the independence to get their own sweet treat. On the other hand if they have learned to like vegetables on their own merit, they are more likely to continue to eat them.

3. Research also suggests children who were often rewarded with sweet treats when they were young can grow into adults who tend to be emotional eaters, rewarding every win, or soothing every unpleasant emotion, with something sweet.

Try this instead

Ideally we'd like our children to learn to enjoy eating vegetables, not to eat them as a means to get dessert.

But learning to love vegetables takes time. Children are naturally averse to the bitter flavours present in many vegetables, particularly greens. They have far more taste buds than we do as adults, although this does tend to decline with age.

1. Because children are more drawn to sweeter flavours, try roasting your vegetables, which brings out their natural sweetness. You can also lessen bitter flavours by accompanying veggies with a cheese or tomato sauce.

2. If your child is reluctant to eat salad, add a little sweetness and colour by including fruit such as apples, oranges, blueberries, cherries or grapes.

"Roast your vegetables, to bring out their natural sweetness."



Common mistake number 3: Sneaking vegetables

“I served up macaroni cheese last week,” said Fran. “Holly stared at it, then began to slowly pick out every single piece of grated zucchini she could find. It’s incredibly frustrating!”

Getting vegetables into your children any which way you can by hiding them in other foods seems to make sense, but only if you’re transparent about it.

There are times when bulking up food with veg is a good tactic. In a soup, or a homemade pasta sauce, muffins and smoothies. It increases the nutritional value of the meal, and teaches kids that vegetables can be eaten many ways.

What doesn’t work is when kids get mixed message about their meals. This can happen when they find you’ve snuck vegetables into their favourite food, which doesn’t normally contain these hidden ‘nasties’. They may wonder how often you’ve been doing this, and this erosion of trust can spell bad news for future meals.

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Try this instead



As a parent, you naturally want your kids to grow into adults who make good nutrition choices. So a great way to help them make those choices is to let them learn about the different tastes and textures of vegetables.

- 1. Boosting the nutrient content of meals however you can is a great idea, but serve the real deal too.** Even if your child only takes a small amount, it's always good for them to see and identify vegetables.
- 2. Vary how you present vegetables.** You may find your children prefer sweet potato baked as chips rather than mashed, raw carrots more than cooked, roasted cauliflower over steamed.
- 3. If your child asks you, tell them what's in the food,** whether that's black beans in brownies, zucchini in muffins, or vegetables in cheese fritters. This teaches them about the different forms veggies can take, and how they can taste very different.

A new definition of success

“When we go to a friend’s place for dinner, Holly can surprise me,” says Fran. “She can end up eating a vegetable that she’s refused many times before.”

Fran’s experience isn’t unique. It’s easy to assume your child doesn’t like a particular vegetable because she has refused it several times.

But research tells us to hang in there, as it can take between eight and 15 exposures to a food before a child is likely to take a bite, even longer before he admits to liking it. Don’t get disheartened if it takes a few tries. And like Holly, your child may be more likely to eat a vegetable if her friends are eating it too – peer pressure is known to strongly influence children’s eating.



"Don't judge your success as a parent by how many vegetables your child eats. Your success lies in exposing your children to vegetables, whether or not they eat them."