

to sneak or not to sneak?

Sneaking veggies into food kids already love has become a familiar tool in parents' box of tricks. But will it teach your child to like his veggies and develop healthy eating habits? The experts weigh in.

by Marygrace Taylor

The case for sneaking

Most kids, of course, are much more interested in how a food tastes than whether it's good for them. "Foods with high amounts of sugar, salt, and fat have an addictive quality," says Dina Rose, Ph.D., a food sociologist. "And since kids operate with immature decision-making abilities, they're much more likely to think that if they like the way something tastes, that's what they should eat." So pureeing veggies and slipping them in pizza or brownies is a way to get picky eaters the nutrients they need.

The sneaking backlash

On the other hand, by serving up hidden veggie-fied versions of kid-friendly foods like pancakes or mac and cheese, you're likely reinforcing your child's preference for the flavors, textures, and smells of *those* foods instead of the ones associated with vegetables, Rose says. And when your child discovers you've been sneaking, it sends the message that vegetables taste so bad that they need to be disguised. "It's treating vegetables like taking your medicine," says Ashley Koff, R.D., co-author of *Mom Energy: A Simple Plan to Live Fully Charged*. "Sneaking tells your child that veggies are good for her, but she probably won't like them."

Making it work for your family

If the ultimate goal is to teach kids to like vegetables, is it ever okay to add them to places they don't typically belong? "If adding extra vegetables to a dish makes something healthier and you still like the taste, why wouldn't you do it?" reasons Maureen Spill, lead author of a study from Penn State that proved how well the sneaking trick works (kids got extra nutrients from happily munching on food with hidden vegetables). But take note: Adding hidden veggies to foods is a technique best used alongside other methods



that promote vegetables on their own, like serving baby carrots or tomato soup as an appetizer when kids are really hungry (and consequently, less picky), Spill says.

What about teaching kids to like veggies, plain and simple? The key is shaping your child's taste buds and attitude: **Emphasize variety** Try to avoid serving the same food two days in a row. "You want your child to learn the importance of eating a varied diet. Eventually, the idea of variety opens the door to trying new foods," says Rose.

Start with sweet, then move on Research shows that kids are initially more accepting of bitter and sour foods when sweetened with sugar—but will then keep eating them after the sugar is removed. Serve steamed broccoli with sweet teriyaki sauce, then gradually cut back on the sauce. Later, go for non-sweet flavors, like broccoli florets with hummus. The nutrition will come along for the ride, Rose says.

Go for whole Opt for whole vegetables in whatever form your child will eat them over processed vegetable products, to help her taste buds accept vegetables' stronger flavors and unfamiliar textures. Creamed spinach might not be as virtuous as steamed, but it's still better than a processed spinach chip—and it'll get your child accustomed to eating spinach, not crunchy, salty things. ●

SPIT IT OUT?

Sure, it's a little gross, but a study from Louisiana State University found that kids who are given the option to spit out a veggie are more likely to try it multiple times—and eventually come to like the taste.