

Introducing New Foods to Young Children in the Child Care Setting

Children are often picky eaters during the preschool years, particularly if the food is a green leafy thing or a green round thing! Accepting and eating a wide variety of foods happens over a period of time. Introducing children to new foods, like vegetables, takes some creative menu planning and meal presentation. Here are some child-friendly tips to help introduce new foods in the child care setting.

Serve it

Take the time to present food, especially new foods, to children in an appealing way. Children are naturally attracted to anything that is fun, colorful, or imaginative, so be creative with food presentation. Everyone is familiar with “ants on a log” made with celery, peanut butter, and raisins, but you could also try a “vegetable car” made with celery for the body and tomatoes for the wheels. Here are some other ideas:

- Cut vegetables into fun shapes and arrange them in the shape of an animal or cartoon character on an open faced sandwich.
- Provide children with an assortment of raw vegetables in different colors and shapes and let them make their own edible artwork.
- Appeal to their imagination by referring to vegetables with catchy names, such as “dinosaur broccoli trees” or “X-ray vision carrots.”



Try fixing vegetables in different ways too. Children may not like plain vegetables, but they may like them prepared a different way. For example, cut firm veggies such as carrots, parsnips, sweet potatoes, or turnips into thin slices and bake them in the oven with a little olive oil. They make a tasty alternative to potato chips. Or cut them into wedges and oven bake them as a healthier alternative to French fries.

Dip it

Low-fat ranch dressing and cheese sauce are always popular choices, but try other dips and sauces as well:

- Spaghetti sauce
- Barbecue sauce
- Peanut butter
- Cream cheese
- Ketchup or mustard
- Gravy

Although some combinations of vegetables and dips might not appeal to adult taste buds, adding a dip may be just the thing to get a child to try a new veggie.

Hide it

One way to assure that picky eaters get enough vegetables in their diet is to sneak vegetables into other foods they already like. Here are some ideas to try:

- Add finely sliced or shredded vegetables to a food children like well, such as rice or mashed potatoes.
- Include chopped vegetables in casseroles, mixed dishes, or sauces. For example, add finely chopped broccoli to meat loaf or lasagna, or add tiny pieces of cauliflower to spaghetti sauce.
- Include veggies in favorite desserts and treats, such as carrot muffins or zucchini brownies.
- Try serving a favorite pizza with a small amount of a new vegetable on it.
- Include shredded vegetables in soups.

Grow it

Children take pride in something they plant, nurture, and harvest themselves, so try growing vegetables in the classroom. You can recycle containers such as yogurt cups or milk jugs as plant pots as long as a drainage hole is punched into the bottom. Let children grow easy plants such as lettuce, radishes, snow peas, cherry tomatoes, or carrots. When the vegetables are ready to harvest, they are sure to eat what they have grown themselves.

If possible, let children help prepare food also. This can be as simple as washing and tearing lettuce for a salad or stirring vegetables into a sauce. It's normal for kids to react with disgust when they see a new food on their plate. But when kids can see and touch the ingredients that go into a meal, they realize they aren't so scary to eat.

Model it

"Monkey see, monkey do." Let children see you enjoying a variety of foods, including vegetables. Children love to imitate adults, so if they see that you like Brussels sprouts, they may decide that they do too! Let them know that you think vegetables are fun to eat and taste great as well.

Keep a low-key attitude when introducing new foods. Young children may only touch or smell a new food the first time they see it, or they may put it in their mouth and then take it out. It may take a few tries before they even take a bite. They will decide in their own time if they like the food or not and are ready to take a second and third bite.

Talking about foods helps too. Make it an adventure to learn about a new vegetable by reading a story book or learning about a new culture. Talk to children about the food's color, shape, aroma, and texture. And let children know that different foods are good for them and help them grow.

Finally, don't expect children to like everything. Everyone has food likes and dislikes. The main thing is to relax and rest assured that most children grow up to be adults who like a variety of foods. Just keep mealtime a fun and interesting experience.