

[IMAGE]

Want Your Child to Eat Better? It's All About Repetition

By Editorial Staff

Teaching children healthy eating habits is tough these days – far tougher than it used to be. Why? Because our children are continuously inundated with unhealthy food choices, from the advertisements they see on TV and their many other "screens," to the foods many unsuspecting parents stock in their pantries and fridges. Yes, we're talking about sugary, processed, nutrient-deficient, disease-promoting American food, and sometimes it seems inescapable.

Add to those challenges the inherent challenge of the so-called "picky eater" and some parents are left wringing their hands, desperate to find a way to steer their young children toward healthier food before they've developed poor eating habits that are difficult to reverse. Well, listen up, because research suggests a simple solution is within your grasp. It all boils down to the power of repetition.

A study published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* evaluated whether repeated exposure and correct phrasing would help preschool-age children try four foods they tend to relegate to the "do not eat" lists: tomatoes, bell peppers, lentils and quinoa. Initially, children who did not immediately try one of the foods were encouraged to smell, touch or lick it, and could spit it out if necessary after trying. Children also were asked to rate each food on a five-point scale.

For the next six weeks, researchers tested whether repetition techniques could increase the percentage of children who tried the foods. Two days per week, they offered the children one of the four foods to taste again, but on day two, the researcher incorporated phrases such as "Lentils will help you run fast and jump high" or "Fruits and vegetables keep you from getting sick" into the conversations. After six weeks:

- Children were more willing to try one or more of the four foods.
- They rated the foods one point higher on the five-point scale compared to pre-study ratings.
- Parents reported that children ate twice as much of the foods, on average, one month after the study compared to before the study.

Are you struggling to get your children to eat a healthy diet – or try any new foods at all? As this study suggests, it's not about forcing your children to eat, no matter how frustrating their opposition may be. It's about tapping into the power of non-threatening repetition and letting them learn how to eat right at their own pace. Talk to your doctor for more information.

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