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Banish mealtime battles: five strategies

By Stacey Stein

It's a scene that plays out every night at dinner tables across the nation. You present your children with a meal that you slaved over, only to be met with their emphatic refusal to take a single bite.

If this sounds familiar, take comfort in the fact that you're not alone. For parents, mealtime troubles are right up there with bedtime battles and homework conflicts.

As a registered dietitian and mom to a "super picky eater," Shannon Crocker has a few words of wisdom for parents: "Relax – it's normal and will pass," she says. Crocker advises parents not to force food on kids and to avoid making rules like only getting dessert after eating broccoli, or having to try one bite.

"This can set up a food fight at dinner and stress out the kids and you," she says. "It can also create a negative relationship with food."

If you struggle with a picky eater, here are five strategies to help transform the dinner hour from a battle zone into a pleasant – or at least, a tolerable – experience for the whole family.

Strategy #1: The DIY approach

This strategy gives kids some ownership over their meals. You put out all the ingredients and everyone assembles their meal however they like. Resist the temptation to give your kids input – you might be surprised at what they put on their plate when they aren't being pressured.

Sheet pan meals work well for a DIY meal, like these [sheet pan steak fajitas](#). Crocker recommends keeping meat separate from veggies so kids can easily choose the ingredients they want. Try adding a few extra veggie toppings to this meal – avocado, chopped tomatoes and corn all work well.

Another option is a salad bar supper. Kids can help prepare different veggies, fruits and salad toppings and then everyone assembles their own salad (just like a restaurant salad bar!).

You can deconstruct this [grilled Halloumi cheese and vegetable salad](#) – separate all the ingredients and let kids build it however they like.

Strategy #2: Dip it!

Kids love finger foods and dipping (most adults do too). You might find there's less resistance at mealtimes when you serve food that doesn't require cutlery and – even better – gets paired with a dip.

If you have trouble getting your kids to eat veggies, try serving them with this tasty [maple chive dip](#). Boost the nutritional factor and add a kick of protein by making the dip with Nordica Smooth Plain cottage cheese.

To make fruit just as appealing as sweets for dessert, pair thinly sliced apples (or another favourite fruit) with this delicious [caramel apple dip](#), which is made with protein-packed Nordica Smooth.

Strategy #3: Mini chefs in the kitchen

This approach takes the first strategy to the next level. Cooking with your kids can be a fun shared experience, and according to Crocker, "kids may be more likely to eat something they've helped prepare."

Weeknights can be tricky so you might want to try this approach on a weekend. You should also expect a mess, but just go with the flow – this approach will pay off in the long run.

Start off with simple recipes. These [apple cheddar quesadillas](#) fit the bill and are fun to make with kids on a leisurely weekend morning. This [baked chicken tortellini](#) is a creamy, nutrient-packed dish that can be made with younger kids, who can stir in the ingredients, or older kids, who can be put to work using the food processor. Bonus: this dish also features broccoli and cauliflower.

Strategy #4: Supercharged smoothies

The rich, creamy texture of smoothies can be very appealing to kids. Smoothies are also a great way to pack in a bunch of fruits and veggies in a form that's less objectionable to picky eaters.

Get some greens into your kids' diet with this [apple and kale smoothie](#). Naturally sweetened with apple, vanilla and cinnamon, and featuring protein-rich cottage cheese, this smoothie is perfect for fuelling your kids before school in the morning.

Another great option is this [mega mango smoothie](#) – banana and mango make it sweet, cottage cheese adds protein, and the flax oil gives it some healthy fats.

Strategy #5: Think small

Some children are very sensitive to texture, so it might not be the taste that's preventing kids from eating their vegetables. Chopping veggies into little pieces could make all the difference.

Crocker advises parents not to be sneaky when trying this approach. "Kids will learn to distrust you and food," she says. "Don't hide what you've added – if they ask, tell them."

Cheese is a fan favourite among kids and it's a star ingredient in these [broccoli cheddar bites](#), which also feature finely chopped broccoli. Kids may be more likely to eat this vegetable when there aren't any big chunks to chew.

These [veggie nuggets](#) are a perfect size for pint-sized hands. Loaded with cheese, they also feature an impressive line-up of finely chopped and shredded veggies, including cauliflower, broccoli, carrots and zucchini.

The final word

Mealtimes can be frustrating for parents of picky eaters, but it's important to remember many kids will outgrow their extreme pickiness. Try to dial down the stress, make mealtime fun, and let go of any expectations.

Crocker reminds parents that it can take 10 to 15 (or even more) times of a child being exposed to a new food before they might try it.

"Don't give up," she says. "Keep offering foods in different ways. Be casual and don't make a big deal about trying food."