

Help them be healthy

What can you do to help your fruit and veg-phobic children to embrace their five-a-day? Rainbow Fairy **Natasha Gavin** has a few tips...

When I embarked on my mission to make fruit and veg more attractive to children, it was because I wanted to build a healthier generation. I Know Why It's Yum, Mum! is a social enterprise, and I'm dedicated to achieving my social impact. I believe that to get young children to eat more fruit and veg, you need to tell them why it's good for them (kids are always asking "Why?", right?). I explain - to children as young as two - how carrots help them to see in the dark, or that cabbage helps their tummies (and helps them to poo) and avocados help their skin. We have a little cucumber fight (with cucumber swords), or balance three sunflower seeds on our tongues, and before they realise it, they have had so much fun playing the Rainbow Fairy's silly games that they are licking their plates clean, and enjoying new unprocessed tastes that five minutes before they were declaring they hated.

For 95 per cent of the thousands of children I have worked with that is all it has taken. For five per cent, however, it has



taken much more than that. Here, I hope to inspire you with a few new ideas to try with your children, because sometimes you can make amazing progress with a stroke of luck, a different approach or a creative technique.

The fussy eating epidemic

There are some key reasons behind the current prevalence of fussy eating. I'll be brief, because here I am only identifying problems, not giving you solutions, but it's important that we understand where this issue has come from:

Online shopping Shopping is delivered by the Ocado man. The fridge is restocked, once the kids have gone to bed, as if by magic. No more stressful trips to the supermarket with toddler in tow... but no more exposure to fresh produce aisles in supermarkets either.

Pre-packaging Brussel sprouts on the stem? Who has time for pulling those off the stalk? Green beans are topped and tailed for us busy working parents. It might make our lives easier, but it removes our children further from any 'real' fruit and veg.

Generation graze Whether it's in the buggy or supermarket trolley, or during the older sibling's assembly, we keep children quiet with snacks. Often these are very sweet and filling without containing any goodness. Many actually look like unhealthy snacks too...

Busy lives Many of us don't eat with our children or in front of our children. We eat in

a staff room, or we wait for our partners to come home. They never see us eat up our broccoli, so why should they?

So what practical approaches can you take to help children overcome their fear of such natural, healthy food? I find it helpful to summarise my activities into three main 'interventions':

1 Desensitisation is all about getting children comfortable about handling fruit and veg.

2 Motivation is all about giving them a good reason why they should handle, play with, taste, and eat fruit and veg.

3 Imagination is all about tapping in to their creative little brains, finding fun ways to incorporate fruit and veg into their games, arts and crafts and play.

Desensitisation techniques

Cooking

This is an obvious one to start with. Involving children in food preparation can help desensitise them to natural produce, but please don't just make cupcakes and biscuits! Focus on cooking with vegetables. Make them 'special'. Courgette muffins, leek scones, pitta pizzas. There is no guarantee that an extreme fussy eater will eat what they have prepared, but for most children, cooking with veg will really help them to make progress - not least because the mild green courgette is virtually undetectable in the muffin!

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Messy play

Often, at the heart of extreme fussiness is a fear of dirtiness/sliminess. Apart from painting, there are several other activities to try that will help a child to be less conscious about having messy hands. Try making a jelly, full of toys, for the child to pull out, or mark making with yoghurt mixed with herbs. A top tip from Nanny of the Year (2010) Julie Daniels is frankfurter octopuses, which involve threading raw spaghetti through small chunks of frankfurters, then simmering them in boiling water for a few minutes. Not exactly what I would call 'healthy', but for a child who won't eat any meat or pasta (I've worked with both), it could be a major step forward to drag an octopus through a sea of ketchup and gobble him up.

Motivation tools

Games to get them eating

Everything I do is about making food fun. During workshops we wear cabbage hats, fight with pepper swords, gobble up pea ice cream (just frozen peas), make apple smiles – you get the picture! Before they know it, children are munching on a lettuce moustache to see if it really does make you sleepy, like the flopsy bunnies in Mr Macgregor's garden!

I always give children a funky fact to test out. Bananas make you happy, that's why they're shaped like a smile (it's true!). Another Nanny of the Year (2013), Paula Vekony, showed me how to play noughts and crosses with cucumber circles and pepper crosses. And she makes her own memory game cards with fruit and veg on them. I use real bowls of fresh produce (small bowls of sweetcorn, peas, cheese, etc.) and then challenge children to identify what has been removed! And sometimes we just can't help but snack on things.

Place mats and reward charts

Sometimes encouraging children to eat new foods relies on recognising that tasting something new is a big challenge for them. We often make special personalised tasting place mats. We write children's names in the



middle, with colourful pictures of healthy food and stickers, and then laminate them. Each child has their own mat, and when we do tasting activities they place one sunflower seed on it. When they eat the seed (just one, so nice and achievable), they get a sticker on their personalised reward chart. The challenges become harder as the child makes progress, of course. These place mats are a great starting point, and settings could use them for a more exciting snack-time once a week, once every couple of days. Language is key here: "Let's use our lovely place mats for our exciting food game now!"

Imagination methods

Treasure hunts

Children love treasure hunts. I run them at events, and feel like the Pied Piper as I weave a group of 30 toddlers through the stands and crowds, all hunting for a colourful rainbow sticker: a clue that something wonderful is hidden there – a tin of tomatoes (good for your skin) or a bottle of sunflower oil (good for your brain), or a box of raisins (good for your blood). Rather than a chocolate egg treasure hunt at Easter, how about trying a fruit and veg hunt? Banana chips, dried fruit... Within the confines of your allergy list, I'm sure you could make a brilliant one! Not everything has to be edible, but it's fun if something is.

Assault courses

These work really well with active children, and have been especially successful with little boys. The floor is the sea, so they have

to clamber over/under/through things to avoid falling into it, pick up things as they go along (fruit and veg), and accomplish challenges along the way. Blowing a blueberry into a goal, picking up a sesame seed with their tongue, balancing a sprout leaf on their nose, the possibilities are endless.

Face plates

You can buy great face plates, but why not use a tortilla to make your own? Cream cheese spread thinly will help everything stick. Then get the children to make a funny face using cucumber eyes, kale hair, pepper smiles. After a few photos, they can roll them up, and eat them!

find out more

I Know Why It's Yum, Mum!, a social enterprise that operates on a not-for-profit basis, runs 50-minute Rainbow Workshops for children aged 2-6 years, in any childcare setting or in private homes for groups of mums/childcarers. It also tours primary schools with a theatrical production and workshops about fruit and veg. To find out more, visit www.iknowwhyitsyumum.com or find them on Facebook.