

## Brain food: How to 'trick' kids into eating healthy

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When **Christine Palumbo** served food to her kids, she conveniently forgot to mention that it was healthy. She simply told them how delicious it would be — even before they got to taste it.

If she announced that their plate was a nutritious concoction containing fish oil, iron and antioxidants that help boost their brain power and reduce the risk of chronic disease, they'd probably give her a funny look and lose their appetite.



“Don’t remind your child that the food is healthy,” says Palumbo of Naperville. “Kids don’t care if it’s good for them. They just want to know if it’s going to taste good.”

Palumbo, a registered dietitian-nutritionist and a 20-year faculty member at Benedictine University in Lisle where she teaches about nutrition, has developed a few techniques to make youngsters eat healthy — and even enjoy it. Her children, now adults, have grown into relatively healthy eaters, she says.

One of her techniques is to avoid advertising the healthy contents on their plate. If the plate contains blueberries that happen to be rich in antioxidants, she’d say something like “look how crunchy these blueberries are.” Another technique is the “no, thank you” rule. If a child doesn’t like to eat broccoli, serve it anyway. But insist that at least two bites be taken before your child is allowed a “no, thank you” pass, she says. Hopefully, repeating this process frequently will produce positive results.

“Over time, in most cases, they will become more accustomed to the food” and more likely to eat more of it, she says.

For children who are afraid of trying new foods, called “food neophobia,” Palumbo suggests the following trick. Tell them: “You have to taste it, but you don’t have to swallow it,” she says. The same principal applies — over time, they’re more likely to start eating it.

## Forbidden fruit

It's fattening. It can cause heart disease and diabetes. In great quantities, junk food is a health hazard. But those naughty foods for which Americans pay billions of dollars each year have at least one positive attribute — they taste good.

Trying to cut all junk food from your child's diet could have a negative effect, says Palumbo.

"If you never serve them junk food, it's going to become the forbidden fruit and the kids will sneak it behind your back," she says. "Every once in a while, it's a great idea."

Nancy Rodriguez, a registered dietitian and instructor at Harper College in Palatine, agrees.

"If you say no to something, they'll just want it more," says Rodriguez, who teaches "fundamentals of nutrition" at Harper.

Both dietitians believe that a small amount of junk food in a child's diet is not a terrible idea. At the same time, they encourage parents to sneak a healthy item into a junk food basket. For example, Rodriguez will occasionally buy a few hamburgers for her children at their favorite fast food restaurant — but without the fries. She'll take it home for them and serve it with a side of veggies.

Another popular fast-food item that many kids beg their parents to buy is pizza. Rodriguez suggests insisting that your children eat a salad beforehand. That way, their tummies will have less room for large amounts of pizza and they'll still eat something nutritious.

She's also found ways to camouflage nutritious items into other foods that her children enjoy.

"Vegetables they are not fond of," Rodriguez says. "But I sneak vegetables into a pasta dish." (Hint: sauté veggies and add them into a marinara sauce).

Veggies, which help "fuel" the brain, can be concealed in a variety of dishes, she says. Try sneaking them into chili or a crock pot dish. Even if the recipe doesn't call for it, adding a few select veggies into a crock pot containing beef, chicken or pork generally won't hurt its taste.

For children with a sweet tooth, try offering natural alternatives to sugar-packed snacks. If made with real fruit, a smoothie is a healthy snack that tastes good. Strawberries, which are rich in antioxidants that help reduce the risk of chronic disease, topped with whipped cream can make a palpable dessert, says Rodriguez. In the morning, she suggests serving your child a toasted peanut butter sandwich drizzled with honey as a substitute for a Pop Tart.

“The Pop Tart is loaded with sugar. It’s like drinking pop. You get a burst of energy and then you come crashing down,” she says. “The peanut butter toast and honey has protein and fat and gives you a longer feeling of satiety.”

### **Junior chefs**

Many culinary aficionados believe that involving children in food preparation can serve as a vehicle for healthier eating. Kids are more likely to try unfamiliar foods, including certain fruits and vegetables, when they take part in the cooking process, says Sarah Stegner, a two-time James Beard award-winning chef and co-owner of Prairie Grass Café in Northbrook.

“If you can involve your kids, it makes a huge difference,” she says.

It could be as simple as asking your child to help make dinner by gathering produce from your home garden, she says. If you don’t have a garden, take them grocery shopping with you. Allowing children to have some form of control over what they eat and how it’s prepared will make them want to eat the final product much more than if you made it alone.

There are many recipes that can be made with children in mind. One of Stegner’s favorites, which she likes to make with her daughter, is veggies rolls with a sweet soy dipping sauce (see recipe).

“If I made it (alone), she wouldn’t have wanted it,” says Stegner, who is also one of the founding members of the “Healthy Fare for Kids” initiative, a grass-roots campaign in the Chicago area that asks restaurants to offer healthier food for children on their menus.

So far, the campaign has roughly 30 participating restaurants. In her restaurant, Stegner offers children a variety of healthy food alternatives, like a whitefish filet dusted in flour, pepper and sautéed golden brown with a side of season vegetables like carrots and broccoli. She was surprised how popular this dish became when she began offering it.

“That goes along with my theory that if you put good food in front of kids, they will eat it,” she says.

In addition, she applies the same “junior chef” concept in her restaurant as she does at home. On Fridays, her restaurant hosts a “make-your-own-kids-pizza” program. Children can help make their own pizza by placing their choice of toppings on it before it goes into the oven. Stegner says that when left to their own devices, children have been known to make veggie-packed pizzas.

### **Tips for parents**

Nancy Rodriguez, registered dietitian and instructor at Harper College in Palatine, suggests compromising with your kids when it comes to food. If your kids demand junk food, here's how to dress it up to make it healthier. Remember, moderation is key.

**Pizza:** If you serve pizza, make them eat a salad first (they'll have less room for pizza). Make sure the pizza has plenty of veggies on it.

**Hamburgers:** Buy them a hamburger at their favorite fast-food restaurant. But instead of fries, serve the hamburger with a side of veggies.

**Desserts:** Instead of sugar-packed snacks, offer your children a naturally sweet alternative like strawberries (rich in antioxidants) with whipped cream or bananas drizzled with chocolate syrup.

**Snacks:** If your kids are tired of real fruit, offer them dried or canned fruit for a snack. Dried fruit is higher in sugar than regular fruit, but it's better than cookies. Canned fruit may not be as nutritious as the real thing, but your kids are more likely to eat it and it's more nutritious than sugary snacks.