

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Trying New Foods

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in Toddlers
Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: How can I get my toddler to try new foods?

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests letting your toddler decide what and how much to eat from an assortment of nutritious foods you offer. Trust your child's ability to know when she or he is hungry and full. If your child asks for more, provide a small, additional portion. If he or she stops eating, accept this decision. Don't worry too much about messes made during mealtimes. Young children learn from experimenting.

- 1. Allow your child to explore and experiment.** Learning to try new foods is one aspect of learning to explore and experiment. You can promote the skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning by letting your child explore the new food. He or she may want to smell it, touch it, look at it and taste it. These actions are a great sign that your child is learning and will, hopefully, feel comfortable to try a new food.
- 2. Create a routine for peaceful mealtimes.** People—both children and adults—don't learn to explore without first feeling safe. Your child will feel safer if you set up predictable routines around mealtimes. Routines can include having meals at regular times or in regular places. It can also include having traditions around eating, such as beginning a meal with saying what you are thankful for or singing a mealtime song.
- 3. Establish positive eating patterns.** The American Academy of Pediatrics also suggests including your toddler in family meals by providing a high chair or booster seat at table height. Adults need to provide children meals and snacks at regular intervals. Feed your toddler three meals and two or three planned snacks a day. Foods offered should be nutritious and healthy, with only moderate amounts of sweets. Toddlers gain weight more slowly than during the first year, so your toddler may eat less now than he or she did as an infant. Toddlers' appetites also vary; they will eat a lot at one time and not much the next time.

Have you noticed that when your child approaches something new or forbidden, he or she looks to you to try to figure how you feel about it? In a sense, your child is checking to find out, "Is this okay?" Joseph Campos at the University of California at Berkeley conducted an experiment to test this observation that so many parents have had. He found that babies, from nine to 12 months, do rely on their parents' facial expressions to figure out whether to try something new or not. If the parent smiles at the child or nods, the child is likely to try something new. If, on the other hand, the parent makes a face that expresses fear, the child will become frightened too.

4. Be a role model. You can help your child learn to try new foods by being a good role model.

- When you say, “I never tasted this kind of fruit before, but I want to try it,” you are setting a good example.
- You can make new food look and taste appealing. If you experiment with different textures, colors and flavors in the foods you offer, your child will be more likely to experiment too.

5. Offer choices. Children are more likely to learn to explore when they have a sense of control. In this case, it is helpful to give toddlers specific choices. That doesn’t mean being a short-order cook. Nor does it mean giving unlimited options. Asking your child, “What do you want to eat?” may be overwhelming.

- It is better to provide limited choices: “Would you like a banana or an apple?”

According to studies by Jerome Kagan at Harvard University and Nathan Fox at the University of Maryland, some children are temperamentally more wary of new experiences than others.

6. Remember learning to try new things is a process. Children’s responses to new experiences can reflect an inborn temperamental difference. If you have a child who seems like a picky eater, don’t push him or her too hard or too fast, but encourage your child to try just a bite. And to try again and again. But if this food just doesn’t appeal to your child, find something else that does.

These six strategies will promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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