How to teach kids how to like healthy foods

Courtney McAlister minds her peas and cucumbers— and then eats them, happily. The 11-year-old sixth-grader and her two younger sisters help tend a quarter-acre garden near Union Square in Somerville, where they grow and then harvest not just peas and cucumbers but also herbs like rosemary and tarragon, and tomatoes, and zucchini.

Thanks to the gardening, and other activities run by the Friends of the Somerville Community Growing Center, many foods are “not ‘yucky’ anymore,” said the girls’ mother, Tammy McAlister. This program “has opened their eyes and broadened their diets.”

The McAlisters’ experience reflects what a small but growing number of children’s educators attest: Children learn to eat healthfully through hands-on, sensory-filled experiences with food, not via intellectual lessons about nutrition.

If you advise children to eat carrots because they have fiber and beta-carotene and to avoid sweets because they have saturated fat and sugar, “they’ll go for a Twinkie in a heartbeat,” said Dun Gifford, president of Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust, a Boston-based organization that brings together specialists in food, culture, history, and nutrition. “You get them interested in healthful foods rather than try to steer them away from unhealthy food. Positive reinforcement usually works better.”

Teaching kids how to like healthy foods

Children, until adolescence at the earliest, should not be held responsible for making choices between more and less nutritious foods, said Ellyn Satter, a family therapist and dietitian in Madison, Wis.

“Little children are entitled to be unaware about it,” she said. “Having to make such choices is a grown-up’s job.” Children should “just eat” and be introduced to foods in a neutral manner, with the focus on taste, texture, and smell rather than “good or bad.”

To that end, a few groups like Gifford’s Oldways have put together their own food-based curriculums for elementary school children that are heavy on touching, smelling, cooking, and eating — and extremely light on food guide pyramids, vitamins, and minerals.

The Oldways curriculum, called Eating Right, Page E2
Steps toward eating enjoyment

1. **Experience counts.** Lara Sheikh never forgot the excitement of the cooking lessons she had in grade school with Antonia Demas, who developed a curriculum called Food is Elementary, taught across the country. Now a 34-year-old bankruptcy lawyer in New York City, she has passed it along to her daughter, boasting that the 3-year-old “can break an egg and stir things and measure sugar.”

2. **Keep it interesting.** Telling children about a food’s origins or about children their age who eat it elsewhere in the world might make it worthier of their attention.

3. **Keep value judgments out of it.** A vegetable is not “good,” and a cupcake is not “bad.” They’re both just food.

4. **Don’t make choosing healthful foods the children’s job.** Therapist Ellyn Satter of Wisconsin makes clear that it’s up to the adults in the house to decide the eating choices.

5. **No power struggles.** While the adults get to choose what the children eat, the children get to choose how much to eat — and even whether they eat, Satter said.

6. **Use peer pressure to advantage.** If children see other children enjoying food that you’d like them to try, they might end up more inclined to try it (as long as you don’t say, “See, So-and-So eats broccoli;” that converts it into a power struggle.)

Jennifer McAlister (left), 6, with her sister, Courtney, 11, and neighbor Jonathan Smith, 10, share a bowl of salad at lunch in the McAlisters’ Somerville home.