

## How to teach kids how to like healthy foods

Courtney McAlister minds her peas and cukes — 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

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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.”

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# Teaching kids how to like healthy foods

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Children, until adolescence at the earliest, should not be held responsible for making choices between more and less nutritious foods, said Elyn 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 pyramids, vitamins, and minerals.

The Oldways curriculum, called High Five!, started to take shape when "we actually looked at some textbooks in the public school system in New Hampshire," Gifford said. "They were kind of finger-shaking: 'Eat this and do that because we tell you to.' Nothing fun. No excitement, sensation, good food, textures."

Oldways developed eight lesson plans around bread from different cultures, everything from rice paper roll-ups from Vietnam to Norwegian wrapping bread called lefse.

Antonia Demas, who heads the Food Studies Institute in Trumansburg, N.Y., said the success of such programs proves that, contrary to the belief of many parents, children do have adventurous palates. She proved it herself when, as part of her doctoral thesis at Cornell, she brought foods to classrooms, taught the children about the culture of the people who eat them and the history of how they're grown, and also showed the foods' place in art, literature, and even music. Then the youngsters would touch, peel, chop, and cook on a hot plate.

The result: The children learned to enjoy, and then to choose throughout the year in the school lunchroom, meals like a North African stew made with whole-wheat couscous, Indian curry with vegetables and brown rice, and a soul-food stew made with collard greens, black-eyed peas, and okra.

Out of that project grew Demas's Food Is Elementary curriculum, which has been taught in Lynn and Somerville, and some 300 other school districts around the country.

The lessons stick. Josh Stearns, who participated in Demas's program and is now a 26-year-old graduate student in English literature at the University of Massachusetts, said he tends to do "a lot of curries, various greens like collard greens and that sort of thing."

Sometimes the gains are less spectacular but no less rewarding. Oldways executive vice president Sara Baer-Sinnott, who has taught High Five! in southern New Hampshire, said some mothers told her with glee and amaze-



GLOBE PHOTO BY ZARA TZANEV

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.

## 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.)

ment that, because of her lessons, "my kids will now let two foods touch each other."

Part of the benefit of gardening and in-class cooking programs and gardening projects is the influence that children have on each other. "Most of the kids feel they can take a few more risks when they see their buddies piling on things like cilantro," said Berit Pratt, the school nurse at the Fayerweather

School in Cambridge, who has taught High Five! to third- and fourth-graders there.

Satter, who delves into the subject of introducing children to food positively in her book, "Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family," said one reason such experiences work better than nutrition lessons is that "standard nutrition messages decode as 'Don't eat what you like, don't eat as much as you're hungry

for.' " That negative kind of information "overwhelms" and "frightens" children, Satter said, "because it's information the child can't integrate or understand."

She illustrated the point with the story of a fourth-grader whose teacher told her class that fat was bad for them. The little girl took the message so much to heart that she ended up eating hardly anything at all. "It's an exaggerated tale," Satter said, "but it really personifies the intellectual limitations of children that age. She was not able to keep the information in perspective."

Demas said she believes adults often feed into all the negativism about healthful food, even with their children's best interests at heart. "Think of the way we bias kids against the healthy stuff and toward the less-nutritious stuff," she said. "If you're good, we'll go out and have something high in fat and sugar. But if you don't eat your vegetables, you can't go and do what you want."

Such implied judgments about which foods are worth eating are largely absent from the McAlister household in Somerville. Tammy McAlister keeps it as casual as possible, not discussing the merits of what her children grow and sometimes not even the names.

"Mom, what's the green things that we grow that look like giant grass?" Courtney called out during a recent phone conversation with a reporter.

"Chives," Tammy McAlister called back.

Courtney remembered. She and her sisters like them in salads.