



Notes from Plymouth's River Cottage

In the age of relying on processed food, JOE DRAPER advises how to get our children eating more healthy homemade meals

There are some pretty scary statistics published these days about our children's health. In England alone, according to government figures, 30% of our children are classed not just as overweight, but as obese. And, concerningly, this number is growing.

How have things got so bad? I think, as soon as you have a child yourself, it's quite easy to answer that. Today's lifestyles are hectic and kids can be fairly exhausting. It's so easy to fall into the trap of buying convenience foods such as ready-meals and pre-prepared burgers or chicken nuggets as well as oversweetened yoghurts, juices and 'healthy' snacks that are actually loaded with sugar.

I know from experience that you can spend lots of time cooking up a tasty, well-balanced, meal for your kids only to have them turn up their noses at it. It's then very tempting, the next night, to just pull something out of the freezer that you know they'll eat because you want a moment of peace! You may know that convenient choice isn't the healthiest option, but you're exhausted and you want to get some substance into them. As a parent, the desire to see your children eat up their food is very strong, and it can over-ride your judgment on what it is they're actually eating. So it's not hard to see how kids can become used to eating processed food, and then come to expect it.

Tackling this is not easy. I think it all starts with the mindset of the parent. You have to realise that there's no simple answer and it takes hard work. There will be battles and you may sometimes feel it's two steps forward, one step back, but try and take the long view. Every child will love you for giving them the wrong food - but are you loving them?

Once you've decided to give your child the very healthiest food you can, being inventive with your menus will help things go smoothly. When my boy started eating solids, we made sure whatever we made was interesting for him. So, for instance,



Joe Draper made sure his son enjoyed meals. Now there's little the two-and-a-half-year-old won't eat.

we might add a few subtle spices, or tomatoes and herbs, to rice and couscous. We gave him baked fish, savoury muffins and plenty of fresh fruit. Vegetables were often roasted with thyme and garlic, or I might cook carrots with orange and star anise. These all got him enjoying his meals and, at the same time, trained his palate and helped to foster an appetite for

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healthier food. Now, at the age of two and a half, there is not much he won't eat.

It was a very different story when I was growing up. My mum used to just plain boil all my vegetables and that put me off most veg for years! I was fairly fussy even in my early years of being a chef - I just didn't know how good vegetables could be and was unaware of the unlimited tastes and

textures they can offer. So don't be afraid to offer food with a bit of flavour and texture to even small babies - they often lap it up. Books like Nikki Duffy's *River Cottage Baby and Toddler Cookbook* will give you some great ideas.

A failsafe way to get kids interested in what they eat is to have them cook with you and even grow their own veg as well. It doesn't matter if it's just a few carrots or tomatoes, getting them involved in planting, tending, picking and cooking is not just fun, it also gives them a sense of ownership - it makes it *their* food.

Of course, there's always time for a treat - but why not make that treat homemade fruit muffins or honey granola bars? Then, if you know your child is getting a balanced diet most of the time, there is nothing wrong with the occasional trip to the chip shop or, when you just can't resist those imploring little eyes, the odd ice cream down at the beach. ■

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