

# The Picky Veggiesaurus Rex

Tales of mealtime with the vegetarian child.

Stefanie Adams

“The trouble with children is that they are not returnable.” Quentin Crisp said this and though I am not sure, I am speculating that he was inspired by a three-year-old vegetarian at mealtime. Regardless, I’m here in defense of the millions of pint-sized veggiesaurus’s who still haven’t ironed out the “anything with ketchup” wrinkle in their DNA.

Years ago, after one particularly difficult meal with my then toddler, I called my husband’s ex-wife (a whole other tale and perhaps more interesting...). I complained that it felt like weeks since Luna, my daughter, has eaten anything but Cheerios. She laughed and assured me that both her kids had gone through a similar phase and that with a little bit of patience it would pass. Instead of waiting, I decided that I would try to do something about it. I was on a mission. With a little bit of creativity I would inspire Luna to get excited about hanging off the side of the table in her booster seat. I know, easier said than done, but years later I am proud to say that I was pretty successful.

Here’s the least you need to know: the five ideas that worked most effectively. They are simple, fun, and most importantly allow for educational interaction with your precious little ones.

1. Encourage your child to become more familiar with the food they will be eating.

One of my favorite ways to do this is with a garden. A vegetable garden is great if you have the space (and a green thumb) but an herb garden works as well. The idea here is to get your child interested and involved with the plants. Have him water it regularly and observe how it grows. When a recipe calls for one of the herbs have him pick it, wash it, and add it to the dish. Cilantro is no longer the green stuff you pick out of the quesadilla but the green stuff you added from your garden.

Basil, oregano, cilantro, lemon grass, mint, tomato plants, and parsley are all pretty easy to keep and are versatile and tasty.

2. Instead of calling your child when dinner is ready, let them help you with the preparation.

This one comes with a warning. Kids are messy. Very messy. It takes some getting used to but I’ve noticed that if you have a glass of wine (or 4; just kidding) while you cook you tend not to care so much about the sauce on the ceiling fan.

Younger children can take on simpler tasks such as stirring and mixing ingredients in a big bowl. Anything doughy that they can sink their little hands into is also always a hit. Older kids can help chop or peel vegetables. Point out the steps along the way so they can see how separate ingredients come together to create something savory.

Kids love to dress up so it is always fun to add a homemade chef hat and personalized apron. My mother used to do this and I remember feeling very professional when I donned the cardboard headpiece.

3. Hit the library or bookstore and let your child pick out a book of easy recipes.

Decide on a new dish to experiment with every week. Sit down together and write the grocery list. Make an event out of going to the store to buy the ingredients. Have your child be in charge of important decisions such as the shape of the pasta or which vegetables to pick out of the stack to be weighed and bagged.

It might also be helpful to keep track of successes and failures so you can make a point of expanding further something they enjoyed. Of course there will be new favorites and others you dare not mention again in their presence for fear of flashbacks. Brussels sprout kebab. Flop.

4. Presentation is everything.

Sometimes all the same ingredients merely rearranged can make the difference in whether or not your child will unhinge their jaw. Salad is a great example. When pre-tossed in a bowl, my daughter was very uninterested. Instead, I gave her a plate with the vegetables arranged in a sun. A lettuce/spinach core with rainbow rays of tomato, carrots or mandarin oranges, yellow pepper or squash, and radicchio or radishes. It is very appealing to the eye and she loves that she gets to “play with her food” as she puts the salad together herself in another bowl. Also, dressing on the side for dipping is a lot more exciting than having it already mixed in.

Another favorite is 'sailwiches' on a sea of shredded lettuce or alfalfa sprouts. Half a piece of pita spread with hummus becomes the hull. Cherry tomatoes, halved, become the portholes. Finish it off with a carrot stick mast and a provolone sail and your child will be ready to cruise anywhere. A lot more exciting to any four-year old than a stacked sandwich.

#### 5. Be sneaky.

There will be days when even a block of tofu sculpted into the likeness of Scooby-Doo won't get your child to eat. Times like these we abandon idea #2 and let them play beauty salon with the dog while we cook behind closed doors.

My personal favorite is spaghetti. Kids love it and it is one of the easiest meals to sneak in tons of vegetables. Puree carrots, celery, peppers, broccoli, and squash in a blender (steaming them first will make them softer and easier to conceal) and add the mixture to your preferred sauce. Now you can relax and brush the dreadlocks out of the dog knowing that the kids are eating a delicious and secretly veggie packed meal. Also, freeze extra sauce into individual servings like yogurt containers and keep them in the freezer. Thaw them out when you need a healthy meal on the fly, like pita pizza for 'cheese only, please' kids.

Luna used to gag during cous-cous night because of the unusual texture. I was able to turn her on to it by reintroducing it mixed with maple syrup so that it was more of a dessert. Eventually she accepted it in her main course but it remains an occasional sweet treat.

Here's one final thought:

A few months ago, I went to pick up Luna from school. She ran towards me with a little boy she often spoke fondly of. He looked up at me and asked if he could come over to our house to play. Before I could answer, 'When you're 25,' Luna got really excited and said, 'You can have tofu and yogurt!' We haven't heard much from the boy since. Forget the healthy diet and more quality time with the kids. I might have discovered how to keep the boys away during her more formative years.

\* The collection of data for this article took place over 4-1/2 years between a sailboat and a small pink cottage in Miami. A wide-eyed and fiercely independent test subject named Luna, now 4-1/2, was used for the majority of the research. No one was traumatized during the research except for 25 four-year olds when Luna brought organic cheese puffs to a class party. They didn't glow in the dark. A scarlet 'O' was sewn onto her uniform. Mom was told to bring the one with the cheetah on the bag. Next time.

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