

"Teach children about food—where it comes from, what it is, and how to cook it—and they will have a much healthier attitude about food and eating. They will know what real food tastes like, will refuse to settle for less, and will stop demanding junk food as daily fare."

—Marian Nestle, *What to Eat*

Kids often have a funky relationship with food. With limited time in our daily lives, eating needs to be somewhat convenient, and getting children interested in healthy eating habits through a variety of foods and well-balanced meals seems like a lot of work. But does it have to be so hard?

Edible Bozeman asked Hilary Graham LaFoley to examine the relationship between kids and food. LaFoley is involved with the Gallatin Valley Farm to School program, has a Masters in Nutrition from MSU, and recently completed a year-long internship through the American Dietetic Association to become a Registered Dietitian. After discussing these questions with other members of the Gallatin Valley Farm to School steering committee, here's what she said:

EB: In this day and age of processed fast foods that especially appeal to kids, what is the biggest challenge people face in developing healthy meals that kids will actually eat?

LaFoley: A lot of people might think that the processed foods are the only convenient ones, and it doesn't have to be that way. Taking time to prepare healthy meals at home is a great start. There are resources for parents and caregivers to help them incorporate healthy meals for little time and money.

Getting kids to try and accept new foods is a challenge, but you can't stop at one or two tries. It can take multiple attempts to get kids acquainted with a new food, and patience is important. As one mother of teenage kids told me, you can't just deliver up new foods and expect change overnight. Get the kids involved in the process of developing new menus and habits for greater success.

EB: What healthier foods do kids seem drawn to and why?

LaFoley: Fresh foods, foods they can help prepare and perhaps grow. Most kids love to get their hands in on the process. A great way to get kids to try and to appreciate new foods is by involving them in the decision-making and the preparation process. Using colorful, flavorful foods is a great place to start.

EB: How would you educate children about healthier eating habits? What would you say to them?

LaFoley: It is hard to just "say" something to younger children about healthy eating habits and expect them to understand. Therefore, having a role model, someone who sets a good example for them about healthy food choices, is very important. Ideally, those messages and examples are set at home and at school. In setting an example, it is important to remember moderation and balance. Foods don't have to be categorized as "good" vs. "bad."

As kids get older and more into in physical activity, their physical appearance, and their health, and start making more food choices on their own, education about healthy, balanced diets could be related to where they are in their lives, focusing on how wise choices will help them excel and be their best.

EB: How does "eating local" fit into this?

LaFoley: Combining lessons on healthy food choices with the benefits of supporting local businesses works well, and it is really fun for kids! Farm tours, working in local gardens, hosting a local grower/producer in the classroom, these events get kids involved and help them understand where food really comes from. It also gets them excited about the foods they are introduced to through a local venue. Again, it's about helping kids make a connection with the foods they choose.

EB: How do you think kids can develop a stronger connection to their food?

LaFoley: Plan, grow, gather, prepare, and visit local food venues together.

EB: What advice would you give to today's children about food?

LaFoley: As adults, give kids the tools needed to make wise, balanced choices and encourage them to discover the enjoyable world of food. Help them realize the satisfaction, the flavors, and the benefits by letting them partake in food related activities. As one parent said, her son never ate peas until he grew them himself. *eB*

Did you know...

According to the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Academy of Sciences, standard chemicals are up to ten times more toxic to children than to adults, depending on body weight. Children take in more toxic chemicals relative to body weight than adults and have developing organ systems that are more vulnerable and less able to detoxify toxic chemicals. (Source: U.S. EPA Office of the Administrator, "Environmental Health Threats to Children")

In blood samples of children aged 2 to 4, concentrations of pesticide residues are six times higher in children eating conventionally farmed fruits and vegetables compared with those eating organic food. (Source: CL Curl, RA Fenske, and K Elgethun, "Environmental Health Perspectives")