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# How Vegetable Education Can Help Kids Eat Healthy

An expert shares her insights and inspiration.



By Romy Pokorny Weinberg

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Getting kids to eat healthier food -- especially getting them to eat eat more vegetables -- is a constant challenge for parents and schools. We want the best for our kids but stumble on roadblocks: lack of knowledge, lack of resources, lack of energy and enthusiasm, or a combination of all these factors. Shouldn't it be easier to feed kids healthy meals and snacks?

Lisa Suriano thinks so. A school food industry veteran, Suriano (who holds a Master's in Nutrition and Food Science) founded **Veggiecation** with the mission "to promote and educate communities on the health benefits of vegetables and how to prepare them in simple, unique, affordable, and...delicious ways." In other words, to market vegetables to kids the same way processed food is marketed to them.

Suriano and her "veggiecaters" -- a team of educators and healthy eating advocates -- go into schools and communities to teach cooking and nutrition classes. Not a vegetarian program, Suriano calls it a "pro-veggie" program. Here are her "vegetable education" tips for getting kids to eat and enjoy more vegetables:

### **MAKE IT LOOK IRRESISTIBLE**

"Presentation is extremely important. We eat with our eyes first," Suriano says. OK, but what about picky eaters or the ones who refuse to try new things? Go small, says Suriano. "Tasting portions are a great way of enticing kids to try something new. When you contain a new food in a little cup, it becomes less threatening because it is not really a part of their plate and can't touch any of the foods they plan to enjoy." A little visual trickery goes a long way toward changing perspective, plus it's more responsible than "eat your broccoli and you get this candy bar."

### **ENGAGE AND EXPOSE**

With kids who are just not that into food, Suriano's tactic is simple: "Two words: engagement and exposure." She says it can take 12-15 exposures to a new food before a kid will be familiar with it and choose that food on their own. "In our chicken finger and French fry world, those exposures can be hard to come by for nutrient-dense foods, like produce and whole grains." Her program engages kids in hands-on cooking using fresh ingredients. "Letting them handle whole produce; teaching them how to peel, chop and prepare recipes creates familiarity and develops the comfort level needed to eat new foods." She also recommends involving kids in gardening and shopping for healthy foods together.





PHOTOGRAPHY BY: VEGGICATION

*Lisa Suriano -- in the kitchen with vegetables!*

### **KNOW WHAT KIDS REALLY SHOULD BE EATING**

Suriano says, kids need “a well-rounded array of micronutrients: vitamin C, magnesium, calcium, zinc,” which aid in body and brain development. And the best way to achieve this is to offer a variety of macro-nutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. “Prioritizing fat-free milk and requiring very low levels of fat in general,” as some school food service programs still do, “is a somewhat antiquated, industry-driven approach to good nutrition,” she notes.

**(TRY: [This Week of Kid-Friendly Meals](#))**

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE -- OR A COMMUNITY

Change may be good, but let's face it: it's hard -- maybe especially for kids. Even adventurous eaters tend to gravitate to the familiar and loved -- which is not always the same as healthy. "The personal, emotional nature of food can make that struggle even more dramatic," says Suriano. "Community leaders, such as principals, administrators, and parent groups, who value the holistic wellness of their children are willing to weather the storms that change can bring." Her goal is to see more communities open up to the idea that nutrition education is as valuable a part of the curriculum and learning process as reading, math and science. Hopefully, communities that grow together will grow healthy kids in the process.

***Watch how to make this easy, creamy Garden Veggie Dip. Kids can dip with chips or crudites, either way they'll be scooping up vegetable goodness:***

