

The author helping in the kitchen
of the farmhouse, 19 months

Growing Good Eaters

The author with
her summer
lettuce harvest,
14 months



A tale of farm life, family
and trying new things.

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GROWING UP ON A FARM IN CENTRAL PA, I remember each season had its own unique flavor. In the spring, we'd eat mountains of asparagus from our pick-your-own patch. Summertime was filled with berries, tomatoes, corn and homemade pesto. And by fall, we were in the orchard climbing high on ladders with baskets strapped to our chests. Some apples were cooked down in a big cast iron pot until they became a smoky, thick apple butter, while others were loaded up in crates and taken to the local Amish cider press.

While most kids were watching morning cartoons (cable didn't make it out to our farm) and eating Lucky Charms for breakfast, I was making buckwheat pancakes with homemade berry sauce. At the time, I didn't associate any of these experiences with labels like organic, homemade, rural. It was simply all I knew; it was life.

MOLDING KIDS' TASTES

In my experience, kids are naturally inquisitive and open to trying new things—including new food. They're also strongly influenced by their surroundings and desire to fit in.

We're not born hating vegetables or demanding our macaroni and cheese be bright orange. And although some kids are more open to new foods than others, so much of what we end up liking, as kids and adults, comes from what we're exposed to.

When you're used to a lot of sugar, it's sugar that you crave. Same with salt; same with spices. For better or worse, it's true that parents, caregivers and our culture as a whole have a heavy hand shaping how children interact with food. In the United States, too often we inadvertently narrow the types of foods our kids will accept.

In other countries, there's no such thing as a "kids menu." Instead kids are expected to eat what's served. That certainly doesn't mean they love everything that's offered. But it puts an expectation in place—that children are part of mealtime and try new things rather than being pigeon-holed into chicken-nuggets-French-fries-pizza eaters.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

True, not all foods are love at first bite! "Don't give up, keep trying" urges Katherine Dahlsgaard, Ph.D., ABPP, clinical director of the Picky Eaters Clinic in CHOP's Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in a recent article about her team's research. According to their findings, it takes between 8 and 15 times for a child to get used to a new taste. Yet the typical parent only tries 3 to 5 times.

Dr. Dahlsgaard goes on to remind parents it's often "developmentally normal" for children to have a picky phase between ages 2 and 4 and not to be too hard on themselves.



Son Gavin on his cooking tower helping 'measure' the chopped cauliflower during dinner prep



Son Gavin harvesting and tasting cherry tomatoes from the home garden



Letting kids touch and feel ingredients invites tasting. Also, sunflower seeds are a great alternative for nut-free households and schools.

Although there are things parents can do to help their children broaden their culinary horizons, it's important to remember that even siblings—with the same parents—can approach food differently.

MY EXPERIENCE

Fast forward a few decades. I have two little boys of my own and am trying my best to encourage them to develop good food habits and to introduce them to a variety of different cuisines and flavors.

I can't say my current family—unlike my childhood farm family—grows all our own food. And despite our freezer usually having backup fish sticks, we do our best to eat wholesome, seasonal, organic and local whenever possible.

Balance is also key—see the Pick Your Battles sidebar. On Pizza Wednesday in school, I pack some homemade pizza, but I let my kids enjoy snacktime with their friends—a few cheese crackers and veggie straws aren't going to kill anyone.

More than anything else, I've found including kids in the process of growing, cooking and even shopping for food is the *best* way to get them interested in trying new things. Whether it's eating cherry tomatoes fresh from the vine in our garden, or

making homemade kale pesto—my son loves pushing the blender buttons—there's a sense of empowerment that comes from being part of the food prep process. These experiences open kids up to new food in a way they might not otherwise accept.

And I have my own data. The other night as I heard my older son talking to his electronic toy phone, the toy's voice asked, "What's your favorite food?" My toddler responded, "chicken tikka masala." The phone's automatic response boomed back "mine is bananas." I glanced at my husband and we chuckled—probably not the typical 3-year-old answer, but a good one! And we vowed to keep sharing a broad range of food with our little guys.

This fall, my son climbed aboard his cooking tower (a platform with railings so he can stand at counter level and help safely), and we made a big pot of homemade apple-sauce. As the smell of sweet apples and warm cinnamon wafted I thought, "Maybe this will be our new fall tradition."

From my family to yours, may you create your own delicious seasonal memories—in the garden, over the stove, at the table, or in a pick-your-own patch somewhere nearby.

Pick Your Battles

It was my 4th birthday and I was beyond excited to share the strawberry shortcake my mother made for my class. The teachers sliced up the cake and handed it out to my classmates.

They all took one bite and promptly pushed it away. I was crushed. Sadly, the subtle sweetness of fresh berries and hand-whipped cream was too far a cry from the cake and icing my classmates were used to.

From that day on, I ate all my organic, from-scratch food at home. But if I had to bring something to share with friends I demanded it be store-bought with neon-colored icing.

Kids want to belong, and although we want them to eat balanced meals, there's a time to dig in and a time to loosen up. Happy memories are more important than enforcing good habits 24/7, at birthdays and celebrations.

That said, if bringing neon cupcakes to school disrupts your moral compass (I struggle myself), choose fun single-serving snacks or non-food items to celebrate. Pencils, stickers, small toy favors can be a great way to keep it healthy and avoid food restrictions and allergies altogether.

Toddler Approved Dinners

Here are two favorites in our house that are tasty as well as nutritious.

One note on food sensitivity before I start: food pickiness is a wide spectrum. Some children prefer certain flavors, while others will develop strong gag reflexes or completely refuse to eat if given anything other than their approved list. I understand this—and my heart goes out to you if you're dealing with the latter.

I offer the following recipes and tips in the sidebar as inspiration to support families in creating healthy, fun and diverse experiences with their kids and foods.



Our bright green lemon squeezer is a favorite tool for squeezing citrus into the blender for kale pesto.

Kale Pesto

This recipe makes enough to heavily coat one pound of pasta. It can be doubled for a crowd or frozen for quick and easy future meals. To make a hardy meal, we add protein, often chicken sausage, but we've also mixed in cannellini beans or shredded chicken.

- 1 clove garlic, chopped
 - 3 C. kale (about 1 bunch), washed and roughly chopped
 - ½ C. toasted nuts or seeds (I use cashews or sunflower seeds)
 - 2 Tb. lemon juice (about 1 lemon)
 - 1 tsp. fine-grain sea salt (less if using salted nuts/seeds)
 - ½ C. extra virgin olive oil
 - ⅓ C. grated Parmesan cheese, extra for sprinkling
 - 1 lb. cooked pasta
- Protein of choice

Add all ingredients (excluding pasta and protein) to a blender or food processor.

Blend into a fairly uniform green paste (no noticeable pieces of ingredients). Stop halfway through the blending to scrape down the sides.

Taste and adjust flavor balance to your preferences. For more brightness and acidity, add lemon; for more salt, add cheese or salt; if too thick, add more olive oil or cold water.

Note: When cooking for kids, I err on the side of a smoother consistency. The last thing you want when introducing a new food is your kiddo unknowingly chomping on a big piece of raw garlic. There's no coming back from that!

Stir pesto into 1 lb. of your favorite cooked and drained pasta. Reserve a little pasta water in case you need to thin out the pesto.

Top with desired protein and a sprinkle of extra cheese.

Carrot, Feta Turkey Burgers

Turkey burgers get a bad rap for being dry and lacking flavor, but the addition of veggies and crumbled feta cheese make for a sweet, salty and juicy bite.

A variation that's a favorite in my home: lay a slice of cheese (cheddar recommended) over top of the burger for the last couple of minutes in the oven for optimum gooeyness.

- 1 lb. ground turkey
- ½ C. feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 C. grated carrot
- ½ medium onion, finely diced (⅓ C.)
- 1 generous pinch of ground black pepper
- 2 Tbs. olive oil (for oiling pan)

Preheat the oven to 350°.

Combine ground turkey, feta, carrot, onion and pepper in a large bowl.

Form into desired-sized patties.

Note: The best way to get all ingredients incorporated and shaped into burgers is to roll up your sleeves and dig in. Since you're working with raw meat, this is a better job for mom or dad.

Gently lay patties into a heated and oiled sautee pan. Sear the burgers over high heat and finish in a 350° oven for 10 minutes, or until they're no longer pink in the center. (Smaller sliders take less time.)

Serve on lightly toasted buns (we like thin

Tips and Gadgets to Get Kids Cooking & Eating

HERE ARE SOME PARENT-TESTED IDEAS.

- **Limit snacks.** No snacks two hours before or after mealtime. Make sure kids arrive at the table hungry.
- **Pair known foods** with new foods. Try pancakes with almond butter or pasta with pesto.
- **Cooking platforms** are safer than kids standing on chairs. They're sturdy and have railings on all sides.
- **Create a distraction** by having extra bulk ingredients (oats, rice, dry pasta) and utensils (measuring cups, bowls and spoons) available. Your little helper can stay busy while you do the steps that are less kid-friendly.
- **Pre-measure** ingredients into small containers, so kids can independently pour or scoop the correct amount into the bowl.
- **Get some swag.** There's nothing like a miniature chef's hat and apron to get cooks of all ages in the mood.
- **Use creative names.** My mother-in-law bakes and slices yams and calls them sweet potato cookies—a favorite. Relate new foods to ones kids know. My nieces and nephews would only eat tilapia fish, so my brother served "pink tilapia" for dinner, rather than salmon! #parentingwin
- **Let go of the clean kitchen (and clothes).** None of us need more laundry or messes, but letting kids pour and stir without worrying about that will make the kitchen a happier place.
- **Taste test throughout!** We call them "chef bites," a privileged nibble you get only if you help cook the meal. They make a little chef feel special and encourage kids to try the recipe they've helped create.

sandwich rounds) with a selection of your favorite toppings.

Makes 5 burgers or 8 sliders.

For toppings in our family, that means avocado for mama, mustard for daddy and doused in ketchup for the little guy. As almost any mother of a toddler will attest, ketchup is the condiment of choice! I let them slather it on (within reason). If it gets protein and veggies eaten, that's a thumbs up! ♦



Kale Pesto



Carrot, Feta Turkey Burgers