



# Tried and tested tactics to impress picky eaters

**Angie Tomlinson** reveals handy tricks parents can use to avoid dinner-table battles

Research surrounding the importance of good nutrition for children as a future health predictor continues to build. As the evidence grows, so too does the pressure on parents, many of whom continue to wage a daily war across the dinner table with fussy eaters and vegetable-hating toddlers.

So how exactly can you get your kids to eat their vegetables? Chew meat that isn't sausage? Crunch those apples and drink plenty of water?

## Understanding why

Paediatric dietitian Kyla Smith has spent the past 12 years working with fussy eaters, setting up her own Perth-based practice, Mealtime Building Blocks.

She says while there can be plenty of reasons why children are fussy, the most common she sees in her mini-size clients include a history of painful eating experiences, such as reflux, ear infections and tonsillitis; difficulty biting and chewing; difficulty sitting still at the table; high expectations from parents on what kids are capable of; and sensitivity to the texture, smell or look of a food.

Understanding the reason behind a child's fussiness goes a long way to solving the issue.

"If you can understand why your child finds mealtimes difficult, then you can actually work with them to solve the problems so that they can learn to enjoy a variety of foods themselves, rather than just continually having to coax them to eat or try new things," Dr Smith says.

She says parents often make the mistake of resorting to pressure to get their kids to eat, from bribes to coaxing or cajoling them into eating by using a distraction like the television, or making special meals for each child.

## How much is enough?

Research shows Australian chil-

dren do not eat the recommended amount of vegetables.

According to Australian Dietary Guidelines, a toddler should be eating two to three serves of vegies each day, progressively increasing to five serves for nine to 11-year-olds. One serve of vegetables is equivalent to half a cup of broccoli or pumpkin or a medium tomato.

Fruit ranges from half a serve as a toddler and increases to two serves from nine years up.

Dr Smith says picky eating is a problem when kids stop eating foods from the main five food groups, or eating becomes particularly stressful.

"I tell parents to seek help as soon as they become worried or stressed about their child's eating. The earlier you get support, the easier it is to help kids to feel good about eating and enjoy a range of different foods," she says.

To attempt to hit these guidelines, Margaret Hays, accredited practising dietitian and spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia, says it is important to have vegies available at mealtimes and in easy bite-size chunks.

Taking the kids shopping so they are exposed to different vegetables

can also be helpful. For little ones that don't like chewing meat, Ms Hays recommends mince or slow cooking to soften the meat.

Parents might also find it useful to space servings out across the day and swap out "discretionary choices", such as junk food and sugary snacks, for those on the guidelines.

## Dinner-time battles

To stop the daily battle, Dr Smith says it is important to make the dinner table a happy place to be.

"If it's turning into a battleground, then nobody's enjoying their meal," she says.

She advises taking the pressure off both parent and child by always

serving one component of the meal that you know the child likes to eat, and trust them to try new foods when they're ready.

She advises eating together as a family as often as possible as children learn most from what their parents do.

Ms Hays agrees parents are crucial in modelling healthy eating.

"Kids get their influence from their parents, and surprisingly it is their father the most.

Kids mimic what the adults are doing. So if they are seeing adults making good food choices and eating a variety of foods and getting the vegies on their plate, the kids are very likely to follow," she says.

## Professional strategies

Dr Smith often uses the Ellyn Satter Division of Responsibility strategy to treat her little patients, working on the philosophy that "parents provide, children decide".

"Parents have roles to decide what they're offering for a meal, when they offer it and where they offer it.

"Kids then get to be in charge of if they want to eat it and how much they want to eat," she says.

She uses the SOS approach for particularly resistant eaters who need help to build confidence with trying new foods. Food play is used to teach kids about the sensory properties of new foods, so they can feel good about tasting it when they're ready.