



How can I get my kids to eat more vegetables?

By Ariel Demas

Getting kids to eat veggies is a question parents have grappled with for years. But in the last quarter century this issue has become more pressing due to the increase in diet-related diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer that are now afflicting children. For the first time in the U.S., the current generation of kids is expected to have a shorter lifespan than their parents in large part because of what they are eating.

The solution is simpler than you might think. It boils down to creating fun opportunities for kids to learn about healthy foods by touching, smelling, chopping, tasting and growing them with their peers. I know this is true because it's what happens in my classroom on a daily basis. For over a decade, I have engaged children ages 4 to 14 in hands-on nutrition, cooking, and gardening lessons in a Baltimore City Public School. I have seen thousands of kids devour greens and beans, delight in rolling veggie

sushi, persevere with chopsticks, beg for more kale, protest when they find out how many chemicals are in their favorite cereals, and shriek with joy when they spot a praying mantis or lady bug protecting the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash) growing in the school garden.

Teaching food literacy in an educational setting is important because it puts food and nutrition on par with reading and math, it's a welcome break from academic seatwork, it's a teacher rather than a parent encouraging you to eat your vegetables, you learn skills you can use every day, and the classwork is delicious!

Hands-on food classes also provide an opportunity for multiple intelligences to shine; many students who struggle with academics experience success and leadership in my class. Learning is fun when food is involved. Food provides a great way to bring academic concepts to life. Science and math become tangible through measuring ingredients, finding the circumference of a sushi roll, learning concepts such as hydration and observing states of matter when boiling and steaming foods.

Students learn geography and social studies through international cooking lessons where they prepare traditional dishes made with indigenous foods. Kids enjoy learning about cultural traditions around the world. Positive exposure to cultural diversity via foodways promotes acceptance of other people. A few days ago, a 7th grader surprised me when he arrived to class and said "As Salaam Alaikum", an Arabic greeting he learned last year when we made hummus and falafel pita sandwiches and learned about the Middle East. My food literacy classes have increased curiosity and acceptance in my students about the global community.

My school is culturally diverse. The ethnic breakdown of our student body is roughly 30-30-40 white, black, Latino, and the poverty rate is 76%. Disadvantaged children learn alongside children from six-figure incomes. Some children come to our school not knowing English and many students are being raised by a grandparent. All 765 students in preschool through eighth grade are assigned to my class every year. Students can also participate in culinary arts club and garden club after school. Kids in these clubs cook 200 meals for the Community Arts Nights that take place in the

Fall, Winter, and Spring. During these events, the band and orchestra perform, there is a student art show, and dinner is served in the cafeteria. Students cook and serve theme-based meals alongside parent volunteers and high school students I used to teach who volunteer to help the younger kids.



Our first community dinner, 2004

The children are also involved in International Night, a celebration of diversity. Last year, a mother from Russia taught kids in culinary arts club how to make a hearty potato and cabbage dish, and several mothers and grandmothers from Mexico taught us how to make both sweet and savory tamales. The students served these foods at International Night, and there were dance performances that provided live entertainment.

The food literacy program at my school was initiated twelve years ago with grants obtained by my mother and mentor, Dr. Antonia Demas, of the nonprofit Food Studies Institute (FSI). My mom did her Ph.D. research at Cornell with Dr. T. Colin Campbell as her nutrition advisor. She has trained and mentored thousands of teachers over the years how to use her award-winning *Food is Elementary* curriculum, and written hundreds of grants to initiate food literacy programs in schools around the country and abroad.

The goal of FSI is to have a food literacy educator in every school of the country. My public charter school in Baltimore, Hampstead Hill Academy, is the first school in the nation that has made food literacy education a part of every student's education. When Dr. Demas initiated the program in 2004 she told the principal that she was willing to write grants for three years to get the program established so that others could see it has educational substance. If the school community did not value the program enough after three years of outside funding, she would take the program elsewhere. I am pleased to report that after the first three years of grant funding, the school has paid for the program including my salary and benefits, as well as all food and gardening supplies. Additionally, the principal built a kitchen classroom in a room that previously had no plumbing. It was outfitted with three sinks, a dishwasher, refrigerator, stove, and cupboards. During the first year of operation in 2004 the principal committed paved space to be transformed into the school garden and then two years later doubled the garden space.



Students in the school garden

The investment has paid off. The food literacy program has changed the eating behaviors of thousands of children and their families over the years. For example, the mother of a preschool student recently asked me how to prepare the eggplant her son had in class, because he kept bugging her to make it. A grandmother told me her granddaughter saved her allowance to buy guacamole ingredients so she could make it with her friend at home. A father of twins proudly shared that his fourth graders had recently cooked a healthy dinner for the family.

Dr. Demas and I feel strongly that food literacy education provides a positive solution to our nation's health, education, and environmental problems. If we want to prevent children from getting diet-related diseases, we need to educate them on healthy eating, and schools can and should play a vital role. Right now, the food industry is spending millions of dollars marketing to children. Many busy parents don't have enough time or resources to teach their children how to eat well. Schools can help bridge this gap and give students the knowledge and skills they need for a happy, healthy future.