



TRAINING TODDLERS' TASTE BUDS

There is a lot of learning that takes place once babies transition from an all milk diet to one that contains a wide variety of foods.

By the time children are 12 months old they no longer depend on formula or breast milk as their main source of nutrition and should by now be consuming a variety of foods from each of the five food groups. The first three years of life are therefore crucial in determining children's future food preferences and eating patterns.

Young children are genetically programmed to have a preference for certain tastes and a dislike for others. From the very beginning babies are attracted to sweet flavour, which is what helps them to drink breast milk, a naturally sweet food. They also like salty tastes, but are averse to sour and bitter. These are natural animal responses that would have helped humans survive during hunter-gatherer times. Since most poisonous or toxic plants have a sour or bitter taste, it makes sense that children are programmed to naturally avoid those flavours. A preference of familiar tastes over new tastes would have also prevented children from eating something potentially unsafe. This helps to explain why introducing new foods to toddlers can be ever so challenging.

When children today are given the option of a super sweet food such as lollies or a mildly sweet food such as fruit then most will automatically choose the lolly because that is what they are programmed to do. Limiting children's exposure to super sweet and super salty foods will help to prevent them developing more of a taste for those foods.

Many studies on taste preferences have found that the way we acquire our food preferences is through repetition.

Children learn to prefer the flavours of food that are most familiar to them and especially if they feel good after eating it. It can take up to 15 tries of a food before a child becomes familiar with it and actually likes it. If we offer children the most nourishing types of food all the time then we are helping them to develop a taste for a healthy diet.

Remember that there is also more to food than just taste!

Smell, appearance and our perceived expectation of the food also contributes to the way we perceive taste. Aside from their taste buds, children also rely on smell and other visual cues to decide if a food tastes good or not. Some previous positive experiences with certain healthy food such as in stories and songs, or art and craft can create positive perceptions of those foods even if they have not been tried before.

Author: Nutrition Australia ACT Division, 2013