July 2013

**Help your picky eater become a vegetable eater**

Contact Nancy Schultz, nancy.schultz@co.shawano.wi.us

Somewhere between the ages of two and five, many young children become “fussy eaters,” temporarily refusing to eat all but a few favorite foods and rejecting other choices--especially vegetables.

If a child suddenly turns down all but a few favorite vegetables like French fries and corn, it’s important for parents and caregivers to respond thoughtfully.

“With patience and persistence, adults can help children learn to eat and enjoy a wider variety of vegetables,” says Susan Nitzke, Professor Emerita and UW-Extension specialist in nutritional sciences at UW-Madison.

According to Nitzke, research shows that familiarity is a key factor that determines whether children accept or reject vegetables and other nutritious foods. She points out that a new study from The Pennsylvania State University’s Center for Childhood Obesity Research shows that young children tend to like a new vegetable more after they have tasted it six different times. In those experiments, children were told they needed to taste a certain vegetable of the day, but they were not pressured to actually eat the new vegetable if they didn’t want to.

Based on this study and other research on children’s flavor preferences, Nitzke offers the following tips to help your child like more kinds of vegetables.

--Don’t offer bribes such as dessert and don’t force children to eat something they don’t want. Research shows that bribery increases children’s preference for the reward rather than for the food they are pressured to eat. “It’s OK to show children they are expected to taste new foods, but it will work best if the encouragement is kept low-key and the overall mood stays calm and pleasant,” says Nitzke.

--Be a good role model. If you seldom eat vegetables or only eat peas and carrots, your child will not learn that a variety of nutritious vegetables are part of any good meal.

--Accept partial success. For genetic reasons, some children detect bitter flavors in certain vegetables like broccoli or green onions. Some children prefer their vegetables raw or served with dip while others like them better cooked. If your child shows a strong and enduring dislike for a specific vegetable’s flavor or texture, no amount of tasting is likely to change that. But over time, almost all children can expand the variety of vegetables they are willing to eat and enjoy.

--Get your child involved in selecting and preparing vegetables. “The idea is to make the vegetables interesting and fun,” advises Nitzke. At the grocery store or restaurant, let children choose a new vegetable to try that week. At home, ask them to help peel, wash or arrange the vegetables on a serving dish.

For more information about helping children learn to eat more vegetables, contact the Shawano County Extension office or visit the following:

<http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/top-10-to-get-kids-involved>