

The Trojan Horse Technique for Feeding Picky Eaters



By Dana Laake, RDH, MS, LDN

Remember Odysseus from seventh grade mythology? Seeking to gain entrance into Troy, he cleverly ordered a hollow wooden horse so large that the Greek army could hide inside. What looked like a huge horse was really a disguise to conquer the city.

I have used this concept for decades to hide nutritious food (instead of soldiers) to nourish picky eaters. If you question the wisdom of fooling our children by hiding healthy foods in typical foods, I have news for you: we are all deceived by additives hiding in our foods. If you cannot pronounce the words on the label, chances are it's full of additives. The ultimate goal is replacing processed commercial foods with organic, natural, real foods.

Reasons for Picky Eating

- **Opiate-like peptides** - Children, especially those who have problems with gluten and casein, frequently have limited appetites. Because of faulty digestion, their foods break down poorly, releasing opiate-like peptides, which when absorbed, negatively affect brain function and development, and cause cravings for the very foods that harm them. These cravings limit other food choices, especially for vegetables, proteins and even fruits.
- **Zinc deficiency** - Many children are deficient in zinc, a critically important nutrient. Consequences of zinc deficiency are picky eating and a limited appetite. Processed foods, such as bagels, pasta, breads, pretzels, cereals, instant oatmeal, and crackers - which raise blood glucose - easily deplete zinc. Look for foods with fiber content of five grams or more per serving, so as not to raise glucose levels. A lack of zinc distorts the sensory perception of taste, smell, and textures. A zinc deficient palate is unable to detect the subtle flavors of vegetables. Even after correcting the zinc deficiency, eating problems can persist, based on sensory memory.
- **Sensory issues** - Aversions to the look, taste, color, smell, and texture of foods, or what it has "touched" on the plate can also cause picky eating. Some children are brand specific and can also be exquisitely sensitive to any changes. Like the childhood story "The Princess and the Pea," children with sensory issues can often detect even the most subtle differences. Taste, texture, smell and how the food feels in the mouth all determine acceptance.

Start Small

Rather than introduce a new food in its natural form, begin by hiding a very small amount (about a tablespoon) of it as puree mixed or blended into a well-liked and well-tolerated food. This approach allows the body to accept the new food. As the child accepts the taste, include more. Children who have food texture issues are especially good candidates for blended foods because their sensory development may be younger than their chronological age. Adapt to the sensory level and return to purees until sensory issues improve. Rather than focusing on getting a child to tolerate foods that he perceives as "lumpy" or unpleasant to chew, the goal is getting a child to eat nutritious food, however you can.

Match the Color and Texture

Assuming the new food is a vegetable, use organic baby food purees or make your own. Puree the new food into an established food that does not change the overall color, texture, smell, or taste. If a child eats nothing but white food, start with very light-colored vegetables including squash, cauliflower and corn. If the child likes ketchup or tomato sauce, then introduce deeper-colored vegetables such as beets, greens, peas and beans. Pureed vegetables can be beaten into batter for pancakes, muffins, brownies, and cookies or into tomato and other pasta and pizza sauces, and even into ketchup.

Mix Fruits and Vegetables

Vegetable juice makes a healthy addition to fruit juice. Try mixing carrot juice with orange juice, and then adding a teaspoon or so of another vegetable juice. Serve in a brightly colored sippy cup to camouflage any color changes. Blend pureed vegetables and dried vegetable powders into cooked fruits such as applesauce or pearsauce, into meatballs, and even into nut butters. Carry out the Trojan Horse technique out of the sight of your child!

If none of the above works, a last resort are natural gummy bears, made of fruits and vegetables. I like the quality and taste of those from Juice Plus. Check your local health food store and see what they have.

Muffin Casseroles

Many families have developed what we call muffin casseroles. One resourceful mother developed a GF/CF muffin for her child who ate only breads and muffins, and then gradually added fruit puree to the batter. As he tolerated fruits, she moved to vegetable purees, and finally added pureed meat. Until he was able to transition to eating foods in a traditional manner, he ate his muffin casseroles at every meal and snack—and loved them!

Increase Protein and Nutrition

The Trojan Horse technique is especially useful for kids who need more protein in their diets. Add eggs, especially the high-protein whites, and rice-protein powders to batters, breads, smoothies, meat sauces and meatballs. Do not add raw eggs to smoothies. Use powdered supplements such as calcium and magnesium to increase nutritional value.

Gradually Move On

As a child accepts an increasing number of foods presented in a sneaky manner, eventually, he/she will accept the food alone – I promise! All it takes is patience, and a lesson from Greek mythology!

Dana Laake is the co-author with Pamela Compart, MD of The Kid-Friendly ADHD & Autism Cookbook: The Ultimate Guide to the Gluten-Free, Casein-Free Diet. (See Booklist.) They will be presenting great ideas for acclimating young palates that have long rejected the "good for you" foods at the Defeat Autism Now! conference in April. (See Upcoming Events.)