

# Let children take their pick of vegetables

January 18 2010, by Nicolette Meerstadt

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Children prefer vegetables which are crunchy and have no brown patches. They also get a perk when they can choose what they eat beforehand. So says PhD student Gertrude Zeinstra of Wageningen University, Netherlands.

'It's difficult to feed children with food which they dislike; rational considerations such as health hardly count at all', concedes Zeinstra. She will graduate on 22 January in Human [Nutrition](#) and Communication Science. 'I have searched for arguments which matter to children themselves. Brown patches on vegetables are a real turn-off. Grown-ups might have learnt that such pieces of vegetables can add to the [dish](#) in terms of taste or mouth sensation.' The so-called 'mouth-feel' is also important to children. 'They appreciate crunchy vegetables more than slimy ones. That could be due to teeth and [jaw muscles](#) being in the developing stage and these have less control on the stuff in the mouth.'

## Colour

A pioneering feature in Zeintra's research is the relation of [food choice](#) to [cognitive development](#). 'Primary school children are often considered as a homogenous group, but they undergo major developments in this period. Children aged four to six years view vegetables and fruits according to colour and shape. Their appreciation for vegetables is guided mainly by appearance and mouth-feel. Children aged 11 and 12 however group vegetables only according to abstract qualities such as tastiness or the time of eating. For this group, taste is the deciding factor in their appreciation of vegetables.'

## Eat all up

Other influencing factors are the prevailing mood at the dining table and the freedom of choice given by parents. 'It strikes me more and more that we in the Netherlands consume our vegetables at one moment, that is, during the warm meal. All has to be eaten up then.'

Research carried out using questionnaires revealed that parents often allow their children to choose their fruits, whereas they are stricter in the case of vegetables. Zeinstra wondered whether children would eat more vegetables if they had more choice. To answer this, she gathered 303 children, each accompanied by a parent, to the Restaurant of the Future. Some of them were allowed to choose their vegetables beforehand. Zeinstra: 'The children found it fantastic when they could choose. But that didn't have any effect on the amount of vegetables consumed. That came as a surprise to me because the mood was amiable.' For this reason, Zeinstra feels that if you keep giving children the chance to choose, they would eventually eat more vegetables.

Zeinstra had previously done research into facial expressions and taste.

Provided by Wageningen University

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