

Serve veggies first, and kids will eat them

July 6 2010, By Monica Eng

Health officials and parents everywhere continue to puzzle over how to get kids to eat their fruits and vegetables. But I discovered the answer a few weeks ago.

And it turns out Pennsylvania State University nutrition scientist Barbara J. Rolls made a similar discovery that she revealed in the May issue of the American Journal for Clinical Nutrition.

Rolls and colleagues worked with preschoolers and found that if you feed them generous amounts of vegetables -- in this case raw carrots -- as their first course, they will eat more of them. Rolls and company are funded by a National Institutes of Health grant aimed increasing vegetable consumption in children.

I worked without a grant and experimented on my 6- and 11-year olds. Through them, I found that if you bring kids home hungry from hours of swimming (stubbornly passing up every restaurant on the way home), then feed them consecutive fruit and vegetable courses, they will devour them happily, and skip the fattier foods later in the meal.

It requires the parent to act as a short-order cook or at least to do some advance work, but it worked beautifully. Here's how the meal went:

First course: Fragrant, crunchy Gala apple slices. It helps to have one of those apple corers/slicers.

Second: Sweet red pepper strips.

Third: Spinach sauteed in olive oil and garlic, then sprinkled with sea salt and lemon juice.

Fourth: Two hot bowls of fresh [broccoli](#) soup made by dropping steamed broccoli in a blender with chicken stock (or hot water and a bouillon cube in a pinch).

Fifth: Organic baby greens tossed in a light vinaigrette.

Did they still have room for their organic burgers? About a half a burger each. And no one had room for dessert.

Without knowing it, I had followed many of Rolls' tips from previous books, including "The Volumetrics Eating Plan," that emphasize "preloading" a meal with foods of "low energy density," especially fruits, vegetables and soups. Rolls found that foods with low energy density actually make you feel fuller than high energy density. This is mostly due to the high water and fiber content of the low [energy density](#) foods.

Eating these foods before the rest of the meal, she says, will leave you full with fewer calories.

And while her "Volumetrics" books were aimed largely at weight loss in adults, Rolls' latest research is focused on increasing fresh produce consumption in kids. Although these principles may seem like common sense, Rolls said this is the "first time anybody has shown that increasing the portion size of a low energy dense food, like a vegetable, gives you an increased intake," especially in a specific sequence.

Theoretically the NIH could take the research and make recommendations for public policy that could include the order in which foods are served in schools.

Perhaps the salad or other vegetable could be served before the kids get their nachos, fries and chocolate milk. Instead of trying to make veggies compete with high energy dense foods on the same tray, have them enjoy them first.

For those parents who don't want to feel like short-order cooks and servers, you also can make this work at restaurants. I tried the same preloading principles at a Vietnamese restaurant with four hungry kids.

We asked our server to bring out the cold vegetable salad and sauteed Chinese broccoli before the rice plates, noodle soups and fruit smoothies. And just as they did at home, the ravenous kids dived into the vegetables because nothing else was on the table.

They also didn't notice that I'd asked the server to go light on the sugar in the smoothies. Sometimes, it seems, it's just a matter of engineering the sequence and contents of the meal behind the scenes. Just don't tell the kids.

RECIPE FOR EASY BROCCOLI SOUP THAT THE KIDS WILL LOVE

Cut a large head of fresh broccoli into five pieces. Place into a steamer basket; steam over boiling water until fork tender.

Drop the steamed pieces in a blender that can handle hot liquids; add a cup of chicken broth or hot water and a bouillon cube. Blend for 45 seconds. Add more water and blend again if you prefer a thinner texture. Season to taste.

Pour into bowls and garnish with a squeeze of lemon, fresh pepper or any other favorite condiments. Cauliflower works well as a substitute for

broccoli.

MORE TIPS TO GET KIDS TO EAT PRODUCE

Allow your child to pick out three fruits and vegetables of his choice at the store.

Ask your child to help you prepare the produce for the meal.

It helps to give the fruits and vegetables fun names like "x-ray eyes carrots," according to a Cornell study.

Keep cut-up [fruit](#) and [vegetables](#) around the house in high-traffic areas.

Freeze your child's favorite fruits in season (when they're cheaper and delicious) for smoothies later.

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