

Hunger Strike: Living History & the Picky Eater

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Combining a “no refrigeration” living history style, and a four-year-old who lives on fairy dust and his own saliva can be a challenge. The immediate temptation is to give in, and bring a raft of modern foods to tempt the child—resist this temptation, and simply live for yourself! While it is not an overnight process, you can find a compromise, and can use living history as a means to expand even a finicky palette.

First, consider: what *does* the child eat? You can accommodate tastes for one weekend without long term nutritional deficiency. Will they eat bread & butter (or jam), cheddar cheese, raw vegetables or fruit, egg noodles in broth, plain noodles & butter, or soda crackers? If so, they won’t actually starve during the course of an event. They may even get bored enough with the bland menu to try something new. (It’s also perfectly okay to let them get a little hungry!)

It takes between three and twelve “introductions” to a new food for a child to accept it. Between events, and the off season, are ideal times to introduce new period foods. To introduce a new food, give out a very small portion. When making subsequent introductions of a food, keep to the same “very small dab” amount, and let them know they may have more if they like, and that this is the same thing (or a similar thing) to what they tried before. Many small children will not remember having tried a food, and need the reminder.

Your attitude toward their rejection or acceptance of a new taste will be paramount—balance nonchalance and optimism. After all, at some point they likely *will* enjoy the food you’re introducing (though it took me 30 years to tolerate beets), and it really won’t change the world if they decide not to eat them right now.

When choosing new period dishes to test, increase your likelihood of success by selecting things with a “safe” base. Main ingredients that the child does like, mild spices, and the ability to pick out anything “yucky” will go a long way in helping the child accept a new preparation. If the rest of the family enjoys mushrooms, and the five year old despises “moldy gross fungus”, give permission for that child to sort them out, and set them politely on the side of the plate, or on another dish—without comment!

Consider setting up a regular “Old Food Night.” Testing a new dish once a week will help expand period tastes for the whole family. Set some ground rules: everyone gets just a dab, everyone tries the dab, everyone says what they like about it, and one thing they don’t care for, or that could be improved.

We’ve been very careful to train our kids in appropriate expressions and refusals: “I don’t care for any, thank you”, and “I don’t care for any more, thank you” get the “I don’t want any” message across without rudeness. Another phrase to practice is “please taste this dab, and then tell me if you’d like some more, or if you’d prefer to try it again some other time.”

You’ll increase the chances of a picky child trying historic food by involving them in the production of the dish, whether at home, or at an event. Childhood pride is strong, and few children will be able to refuse to try something they’ve made themselves, or to admit they “hate” it.... After all, *they* made it! Even if they try only a small portion, they’ve tried it. And, they’ll likely spend the rest of the day, or the following day, bragging about their kitchen prowess.

Age is no barrier to participation. You can involve toddlers as small as 16 months. Very small children can “help” by “scrubbing” root vegetables in a shallow basin of water (you may need to rinse them after, but praise them for their help), sprinkling flour, or adding a handful of raw vegetables or fruit to a bowl. Older toddlers enjoy stirring dry ingredients together, and most walking toddlers can help set out sturdy plates and utensils.

The five-to-nine age group can help with all of the above, plus rolling out noodles, buttering or jamming breads, measuring and pouring liquids (not over fires), sprinkling pre-measured spices, stirring liquids (off fire), and pouring beverages. The nine and up crowd can be taught to handle most kitchen duties with adult supervision and at-home training, including peeling & chopping veggies, tending the fire and stirring over-fire pots (teens), and slicing breads.

Keep in mind that events are not the ideal time to make radical diet switches. If your child is addicted to dairy products, you’ll need to plan some refrigeration, or plan to purchase a carton of milk from a modern food vendor each meal (if they happen to be on site.)

With safety in mind, it’s important to make clear water the first beverage of choice, regardless of the pickiness of the palette. Milk is a second choice, but will not help so much as water with hydration, and will dampen the appetite for foods that replace needed nutrients after a day of sweating. I strongly recommend offering pure water and reserving a small glass of milk for a meal beverage. This cuts down on refrigeration requirements tremendously!

Skip sodas and other sugary drinks for children at events. The sugars kill the natural appetite, and the other chemicals don’t have any benefit for a child under the stresses of outdoor living. (Of course, refusal of such “treats” will take a staunch heart—and a stern stance on whining. Remember, even borrowed wall tents have corners.)

When you get right down to it: RELAX. If your child eats nothing but bread and butter for a weekend, nothing bad will happen. Offer the regular meals, don’t stress yourself if they are refused, and involve the children in the preparation... and your finicky eater’s hunger strike won’t continue to be a problem.



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