

THE KIDS FIND FUN IN FRUIT AND VEG

Young children often refuse to eat the fruit and vegetables their diet needs. GRAEME WHITCROFT WHITE finds a strategy that gets them tucking in

WHEN TODDLER George Pain used to sit down for lunch, his mum Victoria would place the carefully prepared meal in front of him and wait for the inevitable tantrum.

From the time he was weaned until the age of 14 months, George would merely glance at his plate before turning away.

"George was simply not interested in food," says Victoria, 33, from Battersea, south London. "He would try not to eat anything except his cereal at breakfast. If I got him to have some plain pasta, rice or a banana during the rest of the day I thought I'd really achieved something."

"Meal times were a nightmare," she says. "I would go to bed worrying that he hadn't eaten enough. My GP said that as long as he was eating something then I wasn't to worry. But, of course, I worried myself sick."

George, now three, is typical of many toddlers who either won't eat much or who are very picky. Unsurprisingly, top of the list of what they won't eat are fruit and vegetables.

This early aversion to healthy foods can lead to problems later in life such as obesity which, in turn, increases the risk of cancers,

heart disease and diabetes.

Cancer Research UK has a five-year research project identifying aspects of very young children's home lives that are linked with healthy eating behaviours. "We strongly suspect the roots of unhealthy eating behaviour are put down very early on in life," says Professor Jane Wardle at the organisation's Health Behaviour Research Centre.

Bookshelves may be groaning under the weight of children's cookbooks but most fail to explain the fundamental

'He loved games like shelling peas and now he eats them'

problem, which is getting the food into their mouths in the first place.

This tricky issue has been tackled head on by children's food expert Lucy Thomas.

Lucy, who runs healthy eating classes for pre-school children in London and Oxford, says: "I was a nanny for 10 years and the problem with eating kept on coming up. Some parents purée food for so long that when a

Picture: ANTHONY CAKE



TASTE FOR FUN: Lucy Thomas, left, helped Victoria Pain to get son George to enjoy fruit and veg by playing with them first

child is presented with a carrot or piece of fruit they want the puréed food instead."

Lucy noticed that when youngsters are involved with activities such as shopping, food handling and preparation, they tend to become more interested in fresh produce.

Her theory is to get children playing with fruit and vegetables before you even attempt to put them on the menu. "Get them to brush their teeth with a strip of parsnip or turn grated cabbage into snowflakes," she says. The emphasis is on touching, tasting, playing and handling without any pressure to actually eat them.

For George's mum Victoria, classes seemed like the answer to her prayers. "I was getting really worried about his health," she says. "He was quite small for his age."

AT FIRST he showed no interest but on his third class, he opened up a sugar snap pea and then, when they went home, he ate some lunch. "I could see his attitude to food was changing," says Victoria. "He really enjoyed games, such as hunting for hidden fruit and putting it into containers. He loved shelling beans and fresh peas and he now eats them raw and cooked."

Today George eats three meals a day, is willing to try new foods and eats most of his healthy packed lunch.

"All children have different food issues," says Lucy. "Some don't eat a varied diet, others won't touch individual things and some hardly eat anything."

"It can take months to try something new but just getting them to try is half the battle. I know that if they don't eat a food the first time it's offered to them, more than half of them will try it the second time."

● *Mange Tout: Teaching Your Children To Love Fruit And Vegetables Without Tears* by Lucy Thomas (Penguin, £12) is available in bookshops. For more information about Mange Tout classes visit www.mange-toutkids.com/020_8672_2400.

TOP TIPS FOR PARENTS

● Never ask a child to eat, try or taste anything. Instead get them to explore the food by asking them to kiss, lick or crunch it instead.

● Don't force your child to eat a meal they don't like. However, don't offer an alternative, just fruit or vegetables or rice cakes. They will be ready to eat at the next mealtime.

● Recognise your own hang-ups about food. Does your diet reflect the range of foods you'd like your child to eat? Children are great imitators, so set a good example.

● Offer lots of variety. A baby's tastebuds develop and change at an alarming rate and are most receptive between the ages of

seven and 12 months. Keeping a baby's food bland for too long can result in shocked reactions to stronger flavours.

● Prepare your child for what's to come on their plate. Children are suspicious if they don't know what they're eating, even if they are told how good it is for them.

● Involve your child in the whole eating process. Take your child shopping and touch the produce and explain where it comes from. Let them help you cook and introduce star charts for eating five a day.

● Get a little messy. Let them squash a tomato or squeeze an orange while you're cooking.