



More vegetables, please!

Has your child ever had a crisis with carrots or trouble with tomatoes? Then perhaps it's time to introduce some fun games to put veg back on the menu

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LUCY THOMAS IS evangelical about her greens, or, to be more precise, about children and their greens. She's on a crusade to inspire tiny taste buds to appreciate the flavours of fruit and vegetables – and we're not just talking apples and cucumbers. Oh no, this is hardcore stuff – everything from leeks and celery to grapefruit and pomegranates.

With this sole purpose in mind, Lucy set up Mange Tout (www.mangetoutkids.com), a kind of mini-foodies club where young children are given activities for tasting and experimenting with different fruit and veg. So it is to one of these classes that I take my own reluctant vegetable-eater, four-year-old Magnus. He generally gets his 'five a day' from green beans, broccoli, apples, berries and oranges, but that's about it. Put a piece of salad on his plate and he looks as if you're about to poison him.

To prepare Magnus for the event, I casually mention that we've been invited to "a sort of party" where everyone mucks around with different fruit and veg. He reacts with disgust – the adjective "yuk" is used a lot, accompanied by some dramatic choking sounds and clutching of the throat. I decide to let this over-the-top reaction go unchallenged.

A week later, I pick him up from school and, without warning, whisk him off to one of Lucy's classes. We arrive to find a dozen one- to four-year-olds (and their parents) sitting in a circle on the floor. The focal point right now is a collection of peas in a pod: can you open the pod, count the number of peas in it, put one on the end of your tongue and wiggle it?

Next up – red peppers. Look at all the fun things you can do with them. Can you brush your teeth with a slice of pepper? This

is when it's my turn to suffer from shock: with the teeth-brushing exercise, I see – possibly for the first time ever – a piece of pepper pass between my reluctant vegetable-eater's lips.

The following week, Lucy pitches up at our house to give Magnus a little more help. Magnus's friend Oskar joins in, and this is when I notice the former actress and nanny in full flow. Lucy captivates her audience – she



is one of the best party entertainers I've ever seen. She has the voice, the jokes, the songs and rhymes – and the children's full attention. In this environment, Magnus quickly forgets that he is actually mixing with the enemy.

On the menu this time is leeks. I watch from the sidelines thinking that there is no way Magnus will embrace this vegetable. But within minutes, Lucy has Magnus and Oskar marching around as soldiers holding their leeks like guns, crunching on raw leaves, pretending to be dragons and using a leaf for their long, dragon-like tongue. She then

has them smearing leek soup on their lips like lipstick and even slurping the stuff.

So what exactly is Lucy's party trick? Well, she has several. First, she understands children: she's spent a lot of time as a nanny and knows the nature of her audience.

Trick number one is to never insist that a child eats, tries or tastes anything. Yes, that's right – don't ever utter those immortal words "just try it". Evidently, this sends children into a state of panic because they feel they are being asked to put something totally alien and poisonous in their mouths. Instead, children should be given exposure and experiences with fruit and veg in a relaxed setting.

Trick number two is to make it all fun. For instance, by showing a child how to tickle his tongue with a piece of broccoli.

And trick number three is to never do any of the above at meal times. The fun, games and silliness all have to occur away from the potential tensions of the meal table and never when your child is tired or hungry.

Finally, trick number four – involve children in activities connected with food, such as shopping, peeling, chopping, even gardening. That way, they can develop a natural interest in fresh fruit and vegetables.

Lucy's tricks certainly seem to work, and she claims that she's had a 100 per cent success rate – even with the fussiest of eaters. Fortunately, for parents who can't get to one of her classes, Lucy has collated some of her best ideas and games in a book of the same name, **Mange Tout** (Michael Joseph, £12).

With Magnus, it's early days, but the teeth-brushing with a slice of pepper appears to work. Now he's almost chewing the stuff. See overleaf for tasty ways to tempt your child ■

For five games to play with your own reluctant vegetable eater, go to

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