

The Great Veggie Debate»

Many parents hide vegetables in foods their kids love, but is this really the best strategy for healthy eating? **By Bethany Braun-Silva**

As any parent knows, the struggle to get kids to eat healthy can sometimes be, to put it mildly, a challenge. To put it more bluntly, if I were to reveal what's going on inside me every time I try to convince my 4-year-old son to eat a vegetable I would surely end up in a padded cell somewhere. Save for carrots, he doesn't touch the stuff. As much as I want to do what's right for his health and, of course, be the best mom I can be, sometimes I just give in and let him munch on crackers. But ultimately that's not good enough for the long term.

Good nutrition is obviously essential for kids, and that means getting them to consume vegetables, no matter how impossible it seems. To accomplish that, a "by any means necessary" approach has become popular among parents who sneak veggies into sauces, juices, and even desserts—anything kids will eat without recognizing those dreaded healthy ingredients. If you're like me, you breathed a sigh of relief when you discovered this method. But not so fast, some experts warn, insisting this is not the best way to get kids to eat healthy.

So, to hide or not to hide? That is the question, and it will ultimately be up to you to figure out what's best for your family. To help, here are the arguments for and against the practice.

Hide 'Em

Of course our kids' health is of the utmost importance, but one of the parenting lessons I learned early on was to pick my battles. While many parents may argue that a battle about healthy eating is well worth waging, others may say it's not, claiming as long as kids are eating all the right nutrients, how they eat them doesn't matter.

Take for instance, Jessica Seinfeld, author of the cookbook *Deceptively Delicious: Simple Secrets to Get Your Kids Eating Good Food* (and wife of Jerry). Seinfeld was among the first to put sneaky vegetable recipes on parents' radar, and her book's recipes include macaroni and cheese with cauliflower and chocolate cake baked with beets. "Parenting solutions are the ones that build good habits—invisibly," she writes. "I want my kids to associate food and mealtimes with happiness and conversation, not power struggles and strife. With a little sleight of hand, you can make the issue of what your children will and will



Lucas, one of our 2016 Kids Cover Contest finalists, poses with hands full of healthy vegetables.

not eat disappear from the table."

Sounds good, right? Kids are getting their healthy fix without the stress and struggle. As a mom of little ones, to me this sounds like great advice; however some experts argue that it's not what's best for our kids.

Don't Hide 'Em

When it comes to sneaking vegetables into recipes, "I understand why parents do it because it has a short-term benefit—to get more nutrition into their kids' bellies at that meal," says Sally Kuzemchak, M.S., R.D., who blogs at realmomnutrition.com. "But long term, it's not very helpful and doesn't teach them any valuable habits."

Many nutritionists argue that when it comes to lifelong benefits, the veggie battle is one well worth fighting and that by hiding veggies big lessons are being neglected in exchange for a peaceful dinnertime.

"When you sneak veggies into other foods, you usually can't taste the flavor of the vegetables at all and you can't detect the textures of the vegetables, so it's not teaching kids anything—except perhaps not to trust mom and dad, who might sneak kale into their cookies," Kuzemchak says.

So perhaps a little struggle today can lead to a lot of healthy habits later on. But as many parents of defiant or oppositional kids (ahem, toddlers) know, it's easier said than done.

Now What?

As with all parenting advice, ultimately you must decide what's best for you and your family. Personally, I will be doing a little of both, sneaking in veggies when I can, but not forgoing raw veggies altogether when it comes to my kids' diets. As Kuzemchak suggests, "If you want to go the sneaky route, that's okay—just be sure to have actual whole veggies on the side, too. Or if you want to make black bean brownies or zucchini muffins, tell your child about the secret ingredient and even have them help you make them."

Sneaking vegetables into food might be a great idea when kids are young, but as they grow it's important to be upfront about the nutritional benefits of whole veggies.

Kuzemchak suggests parents keep serving their kids the foods they want them to eat and to keep offering vegetables in a "no-pressure" environment. "As a former picky eater myself, I can say with confidence that it can take months, even years, for some kids to work up the nerve to try certain foods," she says. "Overall, parents tend to give up too quickly or take it personally when their kids won't eat certain foods. Stay the course and your kids may surprise you."

Here's hoping. And until then, a little deception could go a long way.

Photo: NYC