

Got a Picky Eater? Food Network's Melissa d'Arabian Has Mealtime Strategies That Work!

By Nancy Mattia
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If your kids are finicky eaters, asking them to finish a few stalks of broccoli can turn your dinner table into a battlefield.

Get ready for a truce.

Melissa d'Arabian, host of *Ten Dollar Dinners* and mom of four young daughters ages six to eight, just launched "[The Picky Eaters Project](#)," an eight-week web series on [foodnetwork.com](#) that offers real-life ways to help your children develop more

adventurous palates and create a healthy lifestyle for the entire family. "Picky eating is not just about food," says the cooking pro, who originally developed the techniques to help her own family. "There are power struggles that play into it."

She gave PEOPLE some of her favorite strategies:

Tell the kids to get physical. Fifteen minutes before dinner, send them outside to play, or put on music so they can dance. "Physical activity will make a child less crabby," says d'Arabian, "and when they're less crabby, they're less picky."

Make mealtime a happy experience. Let the family dinner table be where your kids come to share their dreams and joys, and tell fun stories. It's very hard to do that if you're saying, "If you don't eat your broccoli, you're not going to get dessert."

For a few weeks, don't worry about what you're serving, even if it's chicken nuggets. "Your goal is to make the dinner table a place of connection and low conflict," says d'Arabian, who won *The Next Food Network Star* in 2009. Which means no scolding anyone until *after* dinner.

Create positive food associations. When one of her daughter's friends comes over for a meal, d'Arabian does some sleuthing beforehand, finding out which healthy foods the child likes

that her own kids don't. She puts one of the pal's faves on the menu, and when the youngster invariably squeals, "Oh, I love spinach!" during dinner, it gives her daughters a positive association with that food, even if they don't eat it that day. "Making changes is a cumulative process," d'Arabian points out.

Serve "new" foods. "Let's say your kids like both chocolate cake and vanilla cake," she says. "You can be pretty sure they'll like marble cake." When they try a piece and rave about it, congratulate them on trying a new food. "I've mixed two of my daughter's favorite cereals together and said to her, 'Tell me what it tastes like.' And when she said, 'Oh, it tastes good!' I pointed out, 'That's something new!'" Keep building up your little ones' confidence at trying new foods and gradually introduce items that are healthy.

Give them a bell. Instead of yelling—and being ignored—when it's time to gather your crew to sit down for a meal, let your kids take turns each night ringing a dinner bell. "It will create a clear start to your meal and put everyone in the frame of mind of dinner. They'll come ready to eat!"

Allow the kids to keep score. D'Arabian encourages her kids to jot down their opinion of any new foods they try in "taste-test books"—inexpensive notebooks where they rate meals from one to 10. "This sends the message that their opinions matter," she says. "They're allowed to write 'roasted chicken with mustard sauce is a 2, yuck!' if that's how they feel. They're allowed to not like something."

Turn less-healthy foods into side dishes. Let's say your kids love cheesy quesadillas—not the most healthful food. Instead of banishing them from the dinner table, make smaller versions and serve as an accompaniment to soup or roasted chicken, rather than as the entrée.

Let them DJ dinner. Her kids take turns "presenting" dinner: introducing that night's menu with nutritional tidbits supplied by d'Arabian. Sample: "This is chicken and it's protein, which builds our muscles. We've got quinoa, a carbohydrate that gives us energy. Spinach salad is a vegetable and it's got vitamins and it's going to keep us from getting sick." She says: "We need to talk to our kids about nutrition, so they understand healthy foods have different roles, and give them a context as to why they're eating broccoli for dinner and not cupcakes."