


Here's How Vegetarian Chef Amy Chaplin Encourages Her Toddler to Eat His Vegetables

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She shares her approach to weeknight dinner and reflects on cooking with and for a sometimes picky eater.

what's —
for dinner



By Bridget Shirvell September 29, 2021



Credit: Courtesy of Amy Chaplin

Most home cooks agree that though they once found joy in flipping through cookbooks, making meal plans, and spending hours in the kitchen, becoming a parent made that so much harder. Sound familiar? While you probably still love a lazy weekend day making an elaborate recipe, those days are few and far between. Most of the time, especially on a weeknight, meals are a challenge; a rushed, please-let-my-child-eat-more-than-two-bites-of-cauliflower type of affair. We know the struggle, so we reached out to Amy Chaplin, cookbook author, toddler mom, and vegetarian chef extraordinaire, for help.

"I've been a personal chef for so many people and he's the toughest customer," Chaplin says of her son. Here, she shares how she approaches meals with a young child, as well as a look at what you'll find her cooking at home.

Get Rid of Your Preconceived Notions

"I'm constantly surprised by what, my toddler loves," Chaplin says. "I'll think, 'Oh he's going to love this,' and then he doesn't. Or I think, 'He probably won't love this,' and he eats a whole bowl of it." Letting go of what you think you should or shouldn't prepare for dinner will help you broaden your family's culinary horizons.

Focus on the Food Group that Is Lacking

"I loved planning ahead, felt so good about organizing myself for the week, beyond obviously shopping, but also preparing things. Now my main goal with my child is get him to eat vegetables, because I feel like we've got everything else covered. Protein, whole grains, good fats, fruit—it's not hard to get him to eat those but the vegetables are really tough. So that's where I focus," says Chaplin. "Some of the best advice I got was to look at their diet over a three-day period. Not just one day. And over three days, I feel like, O.K., he gets enough," she adds.

Keep Trying

"I've learned this from people that have grown up kids that you've got to keep offering them the good stuff. You can't just cave and go, 'Oh he doesn't like broccoli,' which has been the case for my son, who is two and a half," says Chaplin. One of her strategies is to disguise vegetables at mealtimes. "I finely grate carrot and zucchini and put in the tomato sauce." Another is to use vegetables as snacks. Chaplin was never a snacker, but she realizes how important they are to kids. "When they're hungry, but not necessarily ready to sit down for a meal, that's the time to get in a vegetable," she says. Her third vegetable encouragement strategy is to show her son how food grows: "He'll eat tomatoes off the vine, or pull radishes out of the ground. And kids learn how a really good a fresh tomato or carrot tastes."

Cook with Your kids

Everyone talks about the importance of cooking with and teaching your kids to cook but Chaplin suggests doing this only when the time is right. "It can be really challenging, but I think that it does spark interest and it's a skill they have to have," she says. "But, it's messy, it's inconvenient, I have to be awake and energetic for it."

What You'll Find Cooking at Her House

This fall, Chaplin says she'll be preparing thick, vegetable-heavy soups on repeat. "I can even put [them] a sippy cup," she says of feeding her son. Kale chips are another must-make for Chaplin, who says these crunchy snacks are the only way her son will eat kale. She always has a pot of cooked rice ready for meals, and sometimes, "I toast Nori sheets, and then I can put cooked brown rice, that's a little bit sticky in between (the sheets)."

