

# How To Use Food Chaining To Expand Your Picky Eater's Diet



She posted a picture of lamb souvlaki, complete with cucumbers, tomatoes, feta, lamb, tzatziki sauce, and cucumbers. She said, "I would've laughed last year at the thought of serving this to my kid."

But, here he was gobbling it all up. One of the strategies that helped her son learn to eat the cucumbers and feta in particular was something called food chaining.

Have you heard of it?

## What Is Food Chaining?

Food chaining is a therapeutic strategy used by feeding therapists to increase the variety of foods a child is willing to eat. Basically, **it's a way to help picky eaters eat more foods.** As an occupational therapist, I focus on the actual food chaining element of the strategy.

But, food chaining is an entire formalized plan that was primarily created by speech therapist's Cheri Fraker and Laura Wilbert, they also coined the term.

## What Ages Does Food Chaining Work For?

One of the things I love the most about food chaining is that it can be **incredibly effective for babies all the way through adulthood!**

The reason it's so successful is because it creates small manageable steps a child can take to slowly learn to taste, eat, and enjoy foods that are similar in some way to foods they already eat.

## How Does Food Chaining Work?

Food chaining works by taking a food that your child is already eating and identifying new foods that are similar in color, shape, texture, smell, or taste to serve them at meals.

The more alike the two foods are, the more likely a child is to eat it.

I often adapt food chaining to be very general. For instance, if your child loves chicken nuggets and other types of bread and carbs, but eats no other protein, then offering other breaded proteins like breaded fish nuggets or [homemade breaded chicken nuggets](#) is a great way to start working on new foods.

You can also use food chaining to make a large map of linking new foods together. Your starting place on the map is always a food your child eats well. Let's use a different example...

## How To Use Food Chaining

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Let's say your kid loves pretzels, but they refuse to eat a veggie of any sort. As you can see in the picture above, an example of the next food chaining step is offering white veggie straws, as they are similar in color and shape.

Once those are accepted and regularly eaten, you can then give them the orange veggie straws. They already like the white ones, the orange may have the slightest difference in taste.

When they eat the orange veggie straws too, you can then work on a bigger link to baby carrots or carrot sticks. Carrots are hard, crunchy, and stick shaped, but are cold, harder to chew, and have a different taste.

While my example in the picture stopped with raw carrots, you could also continue to build from them by linking to cooked baby carrots, then cooked carrots of different sizes and shapes.

It's good to have this road map, but I always encourage Mealtime Works students in our picky eating program to **be ready to adapt and allow lots of detours**, because your child might really struggle with a particular food and going in another direction and branching off into other new foods than you had originally planned for.

Like in the example above, you could have introduced raw orange bell peppers cut into slices or sweet potato fries instead of carrots. Or, you could work on those after the carrots.

## Food Chaining Is All About Connections

Even though I specialize in feeding difficulties in children and picky eating, I know as a parent, I'd just look at what my son wasn't eating. I was making grilled chicken, pot roast, or salmon for dinner and I longed for him to eat it.

But, all those foods were such a huge leap from the types of food he was willing/able to eat. Food chaining builds a bridge to get to those foods you really want your child to eat one step at a time through links to food they're already eating.

Using this strategy does require some planning and forethought.

## How You Can Start Using Food Chaining to Help Your Picky Eater

There are some simple ways that you can start to use the concepts of food chaining in your own home. However, if you're working with a feeding therapist and they aren't using this strategy, ask them about incorporating it.

Here's 3 steps to getting started with food chaining:

# How To Use Food Chaining

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## 1. Make a list of all your child's foods.

Take a few minutes and identify any common themes you might see among these foods. Are most or all of the foods crunchy, white, stick shaped, soft, bland, spicy, etc.

While a lot of picky eaters do tend to select their foods because of the taste, texture, color, or smell, not all do. Sometimes it's random. That's okay, but if there is a trend, you can leverage that to your advantage.

## 2. Circle a few foods on the list that your child really likes and brainstorm some other foods that are similar in some way.

Try not to limit yourself here. Write down as many ideas as you can think of. Think of foods similar in color, texture, smell, or taste. If they have several similarities, they're even more likely to actually eat those foods.

## 3. Start serving the most similar foods regularly during meals.

Depending on how severe of a picky eater your child is, they may just start to eat these highly similar foods with no other strategies or help from you. But, many extreme picky eaters usually need other strategies as well, like addressing the underlying cause (i.e.: sensory sensitivities, oral motor weakness) or direct strategies that help kids interact with new foods.

But, even without other strategies, getting these new foods onto your kid's plate is progress, and they're far more likely to eventually eat them. And, once they do, then you can work on another new food.

