A CHILDREN’S FOOD EXPERT HAS SOME SUGGESTIONS THAT SHOULD MAKE YOUNGSTERS EAT THEIR GREENS WITH GUSTO. LISA SALMON FINDS OUT MORE

VEGETABLES tend not to be children’s favourite food. In fact, many parents are lucky to even get a mouthful of greens down their little one, never mind the recommended five-a-day.

However, persuading kids to eat their veg might not be as difficult as you might think – research suggests, for example, that simply seeing images of vegetables can boost children’s intake.

Dr Natalie Masento, a food researcher at the University of Reading, says: “In early childhood, it’s common for children to be fussy eaters and reluctant to try unfamiliar foods.

“This can be frustrating for parents who are trying to ensure their children have healthy diets but it’s reassuring to know that familiarity is the key to making children receptive to a varied and healthy diet.

“It’s well established that children often need 10 to 15 exposures to new foods before they accept them into their diets, but having to prepare different vegetables on more than 10 occasions, without them being eaten, can be very frustrating – and costly – for many parents.

“Research has shown, however, that children’s acceptance of new foods can be boosted purely by a food’s visual familiarity, for instance by looking at pictures.

“There are plenty of ways parents can help their children become more familiar with vegetables, without even serving them on a plate.”

Here, Dr Masento suggests five ways to encourage fussy children to eat their veg:
SHOW THEM PICTURES OF VEGETABLES IN BOOKS

JUST seeing images of vegetables can help familiarise children with new foods and, ultimately, encourage them to eat a wider variety.

A University of Reading study on toddlers, aged 21-24 months, showed some of the children pictures in books about a target fruit or vegetable every day for two weeks, while others in a control group didn’t get a book.

All the toddlers were then offered the target foods every day for two weeks. Compared to the control group, looking at vegetable books enhanced children’s liking of their target vegetable immediately after the study and three months later, and the authors suggest “picture books may have positive, long-term impacts on children’s attitudes towards new foods.

So now, the See & Eat project, an EU initiative involving food experts from the University of Reading and other European nutrition bodies, and supported by the British Nutrition Foundation, has produced 24 free ebooks to help parents familiarise young children with a greater variety of vegetables.

The ebooks, which each tell the farm-to-fork journey of a different vegetable, can be downloaded free from foodunfolded.com.

EXPLORE FOOD WITH ALL THE SENSES

ALLOWING young children to explore vegetables with all their senses, including touch, smell, sound and sight, provides different opportunities for exposure to those vegetables, even if a child isn’t ready to eat it yet.

Parents can engage their child’s senses by asking them to smell vegetables when they are raw or cooked, or by asking them to feel the veg to get a sense of texture, shape and firmness.

This technique can also be turned into a game where children are asked to feel a vegetable in a bag and guess what it is.

SEE WHERE VEG GROWS AND SHOP FOR IT

SHOWING children where foods come from or how they grow, or even taking

Preparing and cooking vegetables together could boost children’s interest
them to the local supermarket, greengrocer or farm shop and exploring the vegetable aisles, can provide important exposure so children become more familiar with vegetables. To turn shopping into a fun activity, parents can invite their children to choose a new vegetable to buy, making this something they do together every time they shop.

If a family uses online shopping services, children can be encouraged to click on the vegetables they would like to try.

4 PREPARE AND COOK

Once a child has been shopping for vegetables, it’s a great idea to involve them in food preparation too, as this gives them the opportunity to learn from their parents’ interest in healthy foods – psychologists call this social learning.

It’s easy to get started by inviting children to get involved with washing the vegetables, putting the ingredients in a bowl, or even just passing on utensils. If this seems like a challenge, just letting children watch their parents prepare vegetables in the kitchen can help them feel involved.

5 EAT VEGETABLES TOGETHER

It’s important that parents encourage their children to try vegetables as often as possible, and eating together, and eating the same meals, provides children with the opportunity to imitate and learn from their parents and siblings.

Children learn about the world from their environment, so when parents set an example of eating healthy foods, it can encourage children to eat well too.

It’s also important that parents give children plenty of praise when they try foods, but don’t pressure or punish them if they don’t eat them.
Meet your greens:
There are lots of ways to introduce new vegetables to your children

Dr Natalie Masento