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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Petits gourmands

How do the French get their children to eat greens, smelly cheese and snails? When one writer moved to Brittany, her fussy kids finally learnt to eat

Karen Le Billon Published: 22 April 2012



Karen Le Billon's daughters went from fussy to French in their eating habits (Karen Bakker le Billon)

When Karen Le Billon moved from Canada to her husband's home town in France, her two young daughters in tow, she was shocked by the food education she received. Not only did she find French *enfants* feeding themselves neatly and happily — on everything from broccoli to beetroot — she was also pulled up on her children's faddy eating.

Soon enough, she saw the wisdom of Gallic eating habits, and set about converting her two fusspots into happy, healthy omnivores. No snacks, no sweets as treats, and definitely no TV at the dining table. In her new book, *French Kids Eat Everything*, Le Billon shares the rules she picked up from French families.

## **French food rule**

### *Parents, you are in charge of your children's food education*

I had a hard time getting my head around this rule at first. Often my children controlled the feeding situation and, in order to deal with this, I became controlling. Then I felt guilty, started to indulge them, and the cycle started all over again. But after watching the French in action, I realised I could be authoritative, rather than indulgent or controlling.

Your goal is not to control what your children eat, but to teach them how to eat well. French parents do this with flair, and I've seen their children grow to develop a healthy love of food — all food.

- Create house rules about food and stick to them. For example, kids always have permission to reach for a piece of fruit, but have to ask permission for anything else.
- Fear of new foods is heightened when children are confronted with choice. So give your children simple choices about vegetables (“Aubergine or spinach this evening?”), but don't let them plan the entire menu.

## **French food rule**

### *Avoid emotional eating*

Food is not a pacifier, a distraction, a bribe or a substitute for discipline. French kids are not emotional eaters, because French adults aren't either. They wouldn't offer sweets to an upset child, or a whiny child, or a bored child. Scientists have found that using specific foods as a reward for good behaviour increases children's preferences for those foods; and because unhealthy foods are often used as a reward, children are being taught to prefer them. Think of other ways to soothe or reward your children and they will learn to regulate their own emotions without food.

- Encourage children to focus on food as a source of sensory pleasure. Rather than saying “It's good” or “It's bad”, ask them to describe the sensations. “It's dry.” “It's spicy.” “It's soft.” Ask them how it feels on their tongue or when they swallow it.
- Try logical sequences rather than punishments. “First we eat our vegetables, then we eat dessert.” Framing dessert as a reward (“Eat your vegetables, or you won't get dessert”) encourages children to devalue veg. Instead, establish an easy routine of first this, then that.

## **French food rule**

### *Food is social*

The fact that food is social doesn't only mean that you need to eat together; it also means interacting, sharing ideas and learning important social skills. Expressing individual food preferences is bad manners in France, so French children sit down with their parents to eat, and everyone eats the same thing, which has an important effect on kids' tastes. This is partly true because most French adults tend to eat healthy meals, with “real”, not processed, food. It is also true because children are more likely to try a new food if an adult tries it first.

- Meals are the times when children get your undivided attention. How much misbehaviour at the table is

simply attention-seeking?

- Create rituals. One of our favourites is asking each person in turn to tell a story about his or her day.

### **French food rule**

*Don't eat the same main dish more than once a week*

We all know that eating a variety of whole foods is important, but how do you get your kids to do it? The French answer is nutritional literacy. Children, in their view, should learn the basics for life: how to read, how to do simple maths, and how to eat. French parents believe that children's tastes are very adaptable; taste is acquired, rather than innate, and it can be taught.

- Build variety on top of what kids already like. If they enjoy one type of cheese, try others. If they like pasta, serve it with broccoli one day, spinach the next.
- Encourage children to move beyond judging food by its appearance and to use their other senses, instead. "Stuff sack" is a game played in French schools: place a mystery food in a bag and allow children to feel it, then have them guess what it is.

### **French food rule**

*For picky eaters — you don't have to like it, but you do have to taste it*

The French view is that children need to be firmly encouraged to try new things. Research shows that it will take them up to a dozen or more tastes before they consent to eat something new. This is normal. Don't make assumptions about your child's food preferences or give up after only a few attempts. And don't be surprised if children "like" something one day and refuse it the next.

- Start early. Many babies are open to new tastes. Take advantage of this before neophobia (fear of the new) sets in at age two or three.
- Children shouldn't be forced to eat (or, worse, to clean their plates), but simply to taste the things that are served.
- If your children don't like something, encourage them to believe that they eventually will. "Oh, you don't like it?" I'll say to my children. "That's okay, you just haven't tasted it enough times yet. You'll like it when you grow up."

### **French food rule**

*Limit snacks, ideally one a day and not within one hour of meals*

French food advice is that adults should eat three times a day, period. While children should eat four times a day, period. In contrast, one in five American children eats up to six snacks per day. Now, there is no scientific consensus on how often you should eat, but the "no unscheduled snacking" rule helps teach your kids to avoid eating for emotional reasons (such as boredom). Plus, your children will eat better at meal times because they will have better appetites. Scheduling snacks is not about deprivation, but, rather, moderation. Kids tend to self-regulate the total calories they eat over the course of a day. So if they don't eat a lot at breakfast, they'll have a bigger midmorning snack.

- Think of snacks like mini meals: they should be mostly made up of healthy, unprocessed foods. Snack only at the table.
- If your child doesn't eat much at one meal, advance the next meal, rather than giving an extra snack.

## **French food rule**

### *Take your time cooking and eating*

French kids are taught all of the common-sense things we know (but forget): eat slowly, pay attention to what you are eating, serve smaller portions. By contrast, our kids get used to supersized portions at an early age, and a culture of overeating and eating-on-the-go that creates a vicious cycle of calorie-rich but unsatisfying foods. An easy way to correct this is to eat more slowly, so your brain has time to catch up with your stomach. As soon as my children sit down at the table, I sit down with them and start a conversation or a story. This captures their attention (so they are more likely to stay sitting) and usually puts them in a better mood, making them more open to eating.

- Children are naturally slow eaters. Slow down your eating to their pace, just as you slow down your walking pace.
- Praise those who eat well, rather than punishing those who don't.
- Encourage (and model) food choices based on maintaining good health and pleasure, rather than fears of being overweight. Being positive about food will have better results in the long run.

*Extracted from French Kids Eat Everything ([Piatkus £12.99](#)), out on May 3. To buy it for £10.99 (including p&p), call 0845 271 2135 or go to [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop)*

