

More than Just Ingredients

Other factors that are not directly related to the food product but still influence children's food choices include the following:

- **Packaging**, which can attract children to a product by its graphics, design or size. Many parents experience an interesting phenomenon: A drink appears to taste better in an aseptic box than the identical product in a multi-serve bottle. Bright colors and age-appropriate graphics can help.

"You have to be careful with designs," says Mary Anne Jackson, developer and president of My Own Meals Inc., Deerfield, IL. "We spent a lot of time developing cute animal characters for the packaging for our children's meals — cows for beef, pigs for pork products — and the concept proved very unpopular."

- **Familiarity**. Children, especially infants and preschoolers, are not generally adventurous when it comes to new foods. As children get older, this influence becomes less important, but it can still have a major effect.

"We have found that 12- to 16-year-old children prefer foods that are simple, comfortable and familiar to them — things like burgers, cheese toppings and anything that's fried," says Barbara McMillan, marketing manager, McCormick & Co., Hunt Valley, MD.

- **Other people**. Obviously parents, caregivers and other food providers such as schools have a tremendous impact on what children eat. The younger the child,

Many believe that children do not like hot or spicy foods. This may be true in some cases, but it appears that most of these preferences come from familiarity with a particular food rather than an innate preference. The one exception might be spices that give a bitter taste. Manufacturers do not add cayenne to baby foods. Yet, it isn't uncommon to see toddlers enjoying hot salsa.

"Teens will not experiment with the herbal flavors; they would almost prefer something bland," says McMillan. "But they do like to experiment with hot dishes: Mexican food, chilies and salsas."

Flavors that appeal to children differ from those preferred by adults. Fruit flavors, such as the currently popular watermelon, generate a candy-like character rather than fresh notes. Children, especially young ones, often eat combinations of foods or flavors that would not appeal to adults: applesauce combined with peas; hot dogs and chocolate sauce; ketchup with carrots. On the other hand, often they reject combinations of food mixed together, such as stews.

See me, feel me

Taste and flavor are not the only product characteristics that drive children's food preferences. Texture also plays an important role, and a number of factors influence texture preferences. The first is physical development. Infants can only con-

sume liquids because they are only physically capable of sucking. Chewing does not begin until about six months of age, and it is not well developed until about 3 years of age. Potential choking in the very young is a hazard, especially with foods that are hard, slippery or a size that can lodge in the throat. Reducing the diameter of a hot dog from that of the adult version or creating small fruit or vegetable pieces is important for toddler products.

Young children tend to prefer food that is easier to chew — hamburgers rather than a fibrous steak, for example. This is not merely a matter of softness and hardness, but of chewing and swallowing.

"Even older kids like smaller, thinner and softer food," McMillan points out. "A lot of them have braces, and they find it difficult to eat harder foods."

Often texture preferences develop through familiarity or other influences besides physical ones. As infants get acclimated to solid foods, they usually follow a pattern of initially rejecting food with an unfamiliar texture. Older children like to eat a variety of textures, although not necessarily at the same time.

Colorful foods appeal to children. A recent fad, especially in confections, was over-colored, mouth-staining products, but now neon colors are the rage.

The shape of a food product often influences its acceptability. This can

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