

Talking to kids about food waste

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Like many working parents, Sophie Jones is pressed for time—especially when it comes to cooking for her family. “I love going to the store to pick out a rainbow of vegetables for a new recipe,” says the North Carolina small business owner. “But by the time I get the kids home from activities, I’m not using the fresh produce I bought to make dinner. I’m serving oatmeal—sometimes seven days in a row.”

Jones is hardly alone. Globally, more than one-third of food produced for humans goes unsold or uneaten. Although there’s no perfect way to measure how much of that waste occurs at the household level, the EPA estimates that it’s up to 40 percent.

That’s a big problem. The national nonprofit ReFED estimates the value of food wasted in the United States at more than \$400 billion every year—about 90 billion meals’ worth of food. The FDA estimates that food waste costs a family of four about \$1,500 a year.

When food is wasted, so are the resources—like land, water, energy, and labor—used to produce, store, and distribute it. In fact, food waste is the single-largest component of landfills each year in this country, which results in the production of methane, a greenhouse gas that’s even more potent than carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions.

But families can take steps to help children understand the importance of reducing food waste as well as also make a meaningful difference. Here’s how to get started.

Since kids’ habits now will translate to eco-friendly practices down the road, it’s important to talk to them about food waste in terms they’ll understand.

Melissa Pflugh Prescott, a registered dietitian and assistant professor of childhood foods and nutrition at the University of Illinois, says when talking about food waste with kids, it's important to connect first. "Start with something that you read or saw that genuinely moved you, like a cool graphic on the magnitude of food waste," she says. Then ask what they think.

To explain the scope of the problem, analogies can be useful. For example, ask kids to imagine a football stadium filled with food waste every day for an entire year—that's how much we waste in the United States alone. Or explain it through their other interests. For example, this interactive tool shows that the 58 tons of asparagus Americans throw away every day weigh about as much as six *T. rexes*. A child who loves airplanes but hates vegetables might soften if they knew the bell peppers tossed every day equal the weight of 15 planes.

For kids who already feel concerned about climate change, give them hope. "So many kids growing up right now feel frustrated and powerless about the future," says Callie Babbitt, a sustainability professor at Rochester Institute of Technology. "Reducing food waste is one area where we can equip them to feel more empowered."

What kids and families can do

Although systemic food waste reduction involves government regulation, incentives, policies, and manufacturing, consumers have leverage, too. These strategies to reduce food waste at home aren't complicated—and give kids agency.

Conduct a home waste audit. "We toss garbage into the magic receptacle known as a trash can and it disappears from our lives," says Christopher Wharton, associate professor of nutrition at Arizona State University. "If you can break that cycle and help kids actually see the waste you produce, it can make a big difference." When his team studied 53 households in Arizona, they found that the visual aid of food piling up in buckets was hugely impactful for families. In fact, his study found that families who collected and weighed their scraps reduced waste by 28 percent over a five-week period. (Learn how to conduct your own family waste audit here.)

Brainstorm the cause of waste. An important step after a waste audit is to brainstorm with kids about why it happened—and what could be done to prevent it in the future. "Maybe you bought too much, or maybe you didn't know how to cook that kind of food very well," Pflugh Prescott says. "But as we talk about what went wrong and what we could do differently, we build kids' food literacy—or ability to use food effectively and efficiently."

Teach kids to take small portions. Kids are prone to taking more than they can eat, so it's important to give them small portions or remind older kids to scoop only what they'll eat, then come back for seconds when available. (Science shows this works: This study found when a university cafeteria removed trays and required students to use only plates they could

carry, students wasted less food.) At home, families might use smaller plates or create mottos around meals. “At our house, we say, ‘take what you want, but eat what you take,’” Wharton says. (Still, experts caution parents about encouraging “clean plate clubs”; instead, teach them to eat mindfully only till they’re full.)

Involve schools. Pflugh Prescott works with middle schools to implement waste reduction strategies in cafeterias, including “share tables,” where kids can leave uneaten, wrapped food on a table for others to eat rather than tossing it. She says parents and their children can talk to schools about implementing something similar, or other ideas like rooftop or courtyard gardens students tend to and eat from to make students aware of food waste’s impact.

Save for later. Brenna Ellison, associate professor of agricultural economics at Purdue University, says to be realistic about what your family can eat. “If you bought a five-pound pack of chicken at Costco, but you probably won’t get through it all this week, package and freeze some up front,” she says. Make sure to package it appropriately and then let the kids help label and organize items in your freezer so you can easily find what you need. (Wharton and his team created this website packed with food storage and waste reduction tips. It’ll even help you make sense of those “use by” labels, a major cause of food waste.)

Make the most of leftovers. Brian Roe, professor in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at the Ohio State University, conducted a study on the use of leftovers and says you don't have to be perfect in planning meals if you get creative with repurposing food. “A little olive oil and panko can make miracles happen,” he says. Host your own food show challenge and ask kids to use leftover ingredients creatively. Veggies can be blended into pasta sauce, or protein can top a pizza. Or, browse the Fright Night app together to find “flexipes.” “When you ask kids for their ideas rather than telling them what to do, you give them autonomy,” Pflugh Prescott says. “They’ll learn more when they’re an active participant in the discussion.”

Get creative with veggies. Wharton says about 40 percent of food waste is fruits and vegetables. Still, parents need to repeatedly offer healthy foods as their kids’ palates grow and change. Try using frozen bags of vegetables like broccoli, doling out only what you’ll use for one small portion. That way, if a child refuses to eat, you’ve only wasted a few crowns. Another hack that works for Pflugh Prescott’s children is setting out fresh vegetables as appetizers. “When there's no competition, the food put out first gets eaten,” she says. Bonus: This also buys you a little time when dinner is running late and the kids are cranky.

Compost if you can. Composting is a great activity for families with the space and energy to do it. “Residential services can also be a good option,” Babbitt says. But while composting is clearly preferable to the landfill, she adds that it’s important to emphasize that the real goal is not to have so much food left to compost.

Give yourself grace. “I think so many of us are optimists and want to cook every night to be good providers to our family,” Ellison says. “But the reality is, sometimes it’s just easier to order food.” Accepting that, we can plan for it, buy less at the store, and create less waste. Of course, save the restaurant leftovers for another meal.