



How to Use Food as a Cultural Gateway for Children

By Qadira Ali Huff, MD, MPH, FAAP, DipABLM
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Raising a [plant-based](#) family opens up an exciting world of abundance: Abundant flavors, foods, and nutrients come with the territory of eating this way. The world over, there are rich traditions of plant-predominant dishes that can be a delicious gateway to learn about the diverse world around us. Children can especially benefit from trying these different cuisines, as they thrive on early exposure to varied flavors, setting the stage for taste preferences and food choices later in life.

Despite the many ways to enjoy a flavorful and varied plant-based diet, many families get stuck in a rut with the same foods and flavors on repeat. I've been there as a busy doctor-mom, and so I totally understand how it happens! But I want to challenge you to consider what your family stands to gain through intentionally expanding dietary diversity. Raising our children to be socially conscious, global citizens can start with an exploration of international food. Added benefits for your entire family include exposure to novel flavors and ingredients, expanded [gut microbe](#) diversity, strengthened cooking skills, and a broadened view of the world and its delectable plant-based traditions.

Here are five tips for how to use food as a gateway to explore diverse cultures in fun and delicious ways.

1. Plan a Theme Night

Has your family been eager to travel? Plan a theme night at home: Allow your children to choose a country or culture to guide your plant-based menu and then prepare the meal together. Make it an event by having your children share interesting facts about the country or culture over dinner. Perhaps you can build on a school lesson or look at a map to choose a location to research online or at the local library together. It will be a delicious learning experience for the whole family!

2. Field Trip to an International Market

Plan a trip to an international market, and pick a new food from the produce section. When you get home, sit down together and research where the food is popular. Then look for plant-based recipes that use the ingredient, and let your little one help prepare the meal. This activity models for children the importance of lifelong learning when it comes to exploring new foods. Keep in mind that adults can learn to like new foods, just like children!

3. Teach with Take-Out

Order [take-out](#) with a purpose by selecting restaurants with new flavors or styles of cuisine. It can be fun to make a list of the different styles of food that your children might like to try over time. Our family's favorite take-out cuisines include Ethiopian, Indian, and Thai—all of which have plenty of plant-based dishes to choose from! And with many small businesses hit hard by the pandemic, it's an especially important time to support plant-based restaurants, particularly those owned by Black people and other people of color, as a worthwhile boost to your local economy.

4. Deconstruct Dishes

If there are apprehensive young eaters in your home, you can help them learn different flavors and foods by serving new dishes in a deconstructed manner. It often helps children to be able to identify each component of a meal. When possible, serve sauces on the side to allow for dipping or taste-testing as desired. For example, if serving a tofu curry, you can plate the [tofu](#), vegetables, and [grains](#) separately, with sauce on the side. Remember to serve a new food alongside one that is a known "safe" or favorite food.

5. Learn From Friends

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If your family has friends of a different cultural background, ask for favorite recipes that you can cook together. If a recipe is not traditionally plant-based, you can creatively brainstorm together or research ways to [substitute ingredients](#). As you cook, the family friend can speak to your children about the special cultural significance of the dish—creating a memorable shared experience for all. (During the pandemic, this can be done virtually and offer a meaningful, safe way to spend time with loved ones.)

Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path. To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#).