



## 5 Tips for Navigating Daycare with a Vegan Child

By Lauren Panoff, MPH, RD  
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After my oldest son was born, I returned to my full-time job and we needed child care. Although we had options, he was being raised vegan, which meant finding a facility that would also comfortably accommodate our dietary needs. Living in a world that doesn't always make being vegan easy, our search presented some challenges. With so many parents raising plant-powered families today, I wanted to share five tips for navigating the world of daycare with a vegan child.

### 1. Ask questions and shop around.

Daycare isn't cheap, so find a provider that you feel is worth your investment. Meet with the directorial staff and visit the classrooms, ideally during meal times. Write down specific questions, whether you're curious about allergen policies or want to pack your toddler's lunches. Ask how they can support kids who don't eat animal products and whether they've had vegan students before. Get a clear understanding of what food is and is not permitted and why, as the school may participate in the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program and potentially be less flexible when it comes to bringing in food from outside. Every facility is unique, so interview several before deciding.

### 2. Clearly communicate your dietary needs—and evaluate how this is received.

Whatever your child's diet looks like, be straightforward and observe the response. Is there hesitation, or does the facility have a plan in place to support kids with alternate diets? If they don't have a plan, do they offer to work with you to create one? Once you convey the importance of your needs, determine if you're satisfied with their feedback.

### 3. Be adaptable and collaborative.

If you're allowed to bring in food, get a copy of the school menus. Consider coming up with a strategy together that incorporates food from both home and school, to make things easier for teachers. See what plant-based alternatives you can find to mimic menu items, especially if your child is too young to understand why his or her food is different from what other kids are eating.

Most daycares today are nut-free zones, so stock up on compliant foods. Use hummus, sunflower butter, tahini, or avocado as spreads. Instead of nut-based yogurts and milks, try soy, hemp, oat, flax, quinoa, or pea-derived varieties. Send dried fruit, seeds, or dehydrated legumes as snacks. Label everything.

Though the plant-based movement is growing, finding a daycare that is truly knowledgeable and equipped to accommodate vegan students on its own is not typical. Be prepared to experience some growing pains, and to take the lead on cultivating the situation you want. Communication and gratitude go a long way when you find an amenable facility.

### 4. Maintain an open dialogue.

Establish a positive rapport with caregivers and talk about your child's eating habits. I knew I had nothing to worry about the day my son's teacher walked me through a list of ingredients on a birthday cake made by another mom. Rather than making assumptions on my behalf, she had me decide if I was comfortable with my son eating it and, if not, what he could have instead. I'm not confident this would have happened if we hadn't made a point to foster a good relationship.

### 5. Remember that *you* can be an educator, too.

Teachers who are willing to protect your child's diet may also be interested in learning about vegan and plant-based lifestyles from you, especially if they're new to having plant-based students. I've personally received requests for my son's lunch recipes, snack brands, and tips for reducing animal consumption. Set a good example; your child may just be the positive catalyst for change that someone else has been waiting for to overhaul their lifestyle.

A recent UK study showed that one in 12 parents is raising their kids vegan, while an estimated 12 percent of millennials call themselves "faithful vegetarians," proving that the plant-based movement continues to expand globally and the need for supportive early education facilities is there. As parents, we have an incredible opportunity to influence change within our

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communities by encouraging daycares to support plant-based families.