

Child's play

She's the go-to chef for slob mums from Sarah Beeny to Donna Air, and has even caught the eye of Raymond Blanc... Fiona Faulkner talks to Rachel Nott about her new book that aims to get kids excited about good food.

Fiona Faulkner is a new kind of children's food guru. Mother of three young children, she's been through many of the table tantrums that a lot of parents will have torn their

hair out over. But rather than resorting to chips and fish fingers every night to keep the peace, her strategy has been to give some of the most troublesome foods a PR overhaul, while also getting kids involved in the preparation and cooking of her all-ages-pleasing recipes so they can engage with the food on their plates. Fiona lives in Somerset and runs cooking-with-kids workshops in schools, and privately via her business Toddler Chef. Her first cookbook '25 Foods Kids Hate (and How to Get Them Eating 24)' has recently been published by New Holland Publishers, priced £12.99.

What's the story behind Toddler Chef?

Basically my son was a bit of a picky eater – and I couldn't find any books or information to help me. So I tinkered about in the kitchen and came up with recipes as well as various techniques that worked wonders and transformed his eating habits. I then began to pass this all on to friends and relatives – and soon afterwards decided to encapsulate the recipes, experience and hard-won knowledge into classes for parents and kids.

What types of families are you appealing to?

Anyone really who wants to get their kids not only cooking – but

also really excited about good healthy food and developing positive eating habits for life. I'm not preachy [she says, with a handful of secret Kettle Chips...] and fully understand the pressures of modern life – so I like to talk to parents as a real mum as opposed to some kind of celebrity chef.

How does your approach differ from other cooking-for-kids titles?

Because effectively mine is a cooking with (as opposed to for) kids cookbook; that's a central part of my ethos. I also take each ingredient in turn (e.g. broccoli; peppers; meat; fish...) and get creative with these specific foods as my starting point – thinking about not only how a child would like to eat these things – but how to 'PR' the ensuing recipes too. With kids, it's all about the marketing (they tend to eat with their eyes and ears – so if they don't like the look or sound of something, you're snookered).

Do you think kids are getting fussier about food?

I don't think they're necessarily getting fussier – but I do feel it's easier for kids to eat the wrong kinds of things because there's so much junk out there, along with convenience foods. I worry that this desensitizes kids' (and adults') tastebuds – plus they become over-familiar with a limited set of dinners (apparently Brits cook the same five or so dinners on a loop). Having said that, it's very tough, especially for working parents, to try and cook from scratch every night. As a working mum I fully understand the pressures of modern-day life. This is why I refer

to my Spinach Pesto (for example) as a hero recipe – it can be made in less than five minutes, with no nasty additives.

Give us your five top tips for calm and happy family mealtimes

Don't bribe with dessert
I base this on an interesting theory called the 'over-justification hypothesis'. The premise here is that kids enjoy something less if they realise they are being rewarded for eating it!

Persevere
Research suggests a child needs to see a new food on average 20 times before they'll want to try it.

Do it Italian
By offering big serving dishes of different foods. Mum/dad gets to pick what goes in, for example, five dishes – but they must help themselves to at least three of these. Or let them decide on one of the dishes and help you cook it?

Offer realistic portion sizes
Remember: little tummies only need little portions! On the subject of size, do also chop veg and meat etc right down to small cubes/chunks. I've found this really does help.

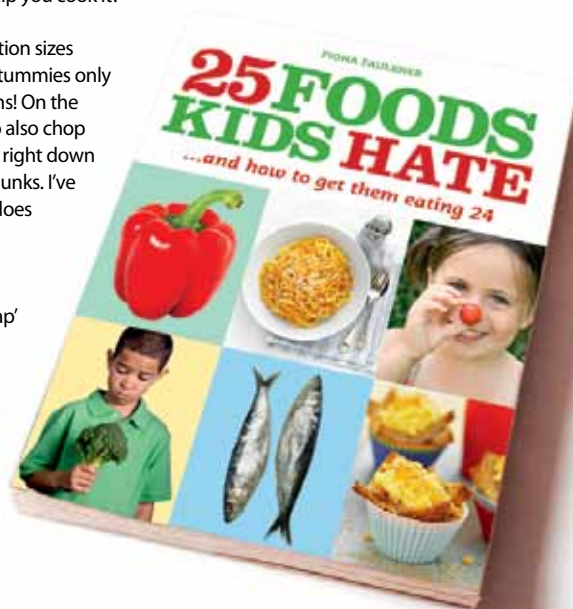
Don't fall into the 'eat every last scrap' trap
By forcing kids to eat 'every last scrap' you are encouraging them to not only

over-eat (if they are genuinely not hungry) but also asking them to ignore the vital 'I'm full' signals from their brain.

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Author, mum and food crusader Fiona Faulkner





Ready, steady, cook!

Fiona's recipes sound and look good, but do they work? Rachel Nott introduces two-year-old Theo to the wonderful world of cooking.

As mother of a maddeningly fussy two-year-old, I could hardly type my credit card details quick enough into Amazon, after reading an inspiring article on Fiona Faulkner in The Sunday Times over the summer. Not only did she come across as thoroughly nice and normal – the sort of person you'd happily confess all your worst traits to without fear of withering or bewildered looks – but also included were a couple of recipes which actually looked like food I would happily eat myself.

There's something so overwhelmingly satisfying about getting an illogically fussy child to enjoy something you've cooked that also happens to contain some decent nutrition. During my son's fussiest patch – starting when he was around 18 months – he would only happily munch on a limited range of sausages, ham, cheese, tinned tuna, sweetcorn, peas, breadsticks, cake, crisps, Weetabix and Innocent Smoothies. I still can't bear to think of the amount of untouched food that ended up in the recycling bin during this time. But remarkably Theo seems to have turned a corner over the past couple of months and is more willing to try some new and more interesting tastes and textures (including Fiona's shepherd's pie with baked beans – try it, it's already reached weekly supper status in our house). So I decided to do a little

experiment and for the first time involved him in some "cooking", in the very loosest term, taking two of the simplest recipes from Fiona's book. Here's how we got on...

Butternut & Banana Smoothie
Pure genius, this one. Fiona advises that, rather than run the risk of cutting your whole hand off while peeling an unyielding raw butternut, you roast the whole thing first until you can easily stick a knife through it. The skin practically falls off when it's done and mashing is a doddle. Theo seems to enjoy this bit – destruction is one of his key hobbies – so the poor butternut gets a pretty punishing pummeling. Next it's the banana's turn – but perhaps he's used all his energy on the butternut as his cutting is a little half-hearted. Together with some pineapple chunks, fresh orange juice and yogurt, everything goes into the blender for a good whiz around. The verdict? He's a smoothie addict so I've got a good feeling about this one. He has a few sips through the straw but then discovers he can make pretty patterns on the table with it. Still, he's willingly drunk something that doesn't come out of a carton, plus gets to indulge his artistic side. It's win win.

Emily's Pea and Lime Dip
Peas have pretty much always found favour with Theo so I choose this one as it's a good variation on a theme. I also like the fact there are only four ingredients – peas, lime juice, cream cheese and parmesan – and it's a nice, messy recipe which I'm hoping he'll love. The ingredients all go into a bowl and I get my hands into the cool, gloopy mixture to show Theo what I want him to do. Clearly more decorous than I thought, he looks dubiously into the bowl, so I

give him a wooden spoon and a fork so he can let all that toddler energy out and whip that cream cheese to oblivion! He sort of stabs at it, then decides to paint my arm with a snowy, pea-studded landscape. The verdict? He has a tiny taste and pulls a grimace, maybe as lime is a new and quite sharp taste. But he doesn't spit it out, which is usually what he does with food he doesn't like, and continues stabbing at the mixture. Fiona suggests her homemade tortilla chips or vegetable crudités to go with the dip. As I've never had any success with raw veg apart from cherry tomatoes, I cop out and offer him a humble breadstick. Theo enjoys dipping the breadstick in the mixture and licking it off a few times before spotting his new rocket and abandoning the whole operation. I reckon it's a grower...

Theo (below) and Rachel (above right) get creative in the kitchen

