Do Not Use a “One-Bite” Rule
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Many people use the one-bite rule. They insist that a child put one bite of food on his plate. Then, the child must take at least one bite of that food before he can leave the table, or have a second helping of a preferred food.

Think about the dynamics of requiring children to eat a specific food. Some adults might think the one bite rule is a good idea. Is it because they worry that a child is not getting enough to eat, or enough nutrition, or do they worry that the child will be hungry later. Most people use the one bite rule from good intentions. In fact, as they force a child to eat that one bite, they may use softeners and warm ups in what they say, “Sweetie, just try a little tiny bite. Do it for me, ok?” Or, “Try one bite and we’ll tell your dad what a big girl you were at school.” The adult may be more direct and authoritarian. “Take that one bite, or you can’t leave the table.” Or, “At this school, children have to take one bit of everything on their plates.”

But let’s think about the longer term outcomes.

- Such a rule builds an unnecessary power struggle between the adult and the child as the child’s develops preferences for types and amounts of foods.
- When a conflict arises between an adult’s desire to control the child’s eating, and the child’s internal cues of hunger, fullness and preference, both the adult and the child walk a tightrope, going toward each other. One will fall.
- Forcing Children to eat can result in aversion to that food.

Some will argue that children are choosy eaters and will not eat what is good for them. Certainly children must eat a variety of foods so they are well-nourished. Learning to eat a variety of food, however, requires exposure to and knowledge about food. Sometimes people use the one bite rule to get children to eat a variety of foods, rather than taking time to help children come to know food.
Think about this. Many foods, in fact most foods, are unfamiliar or new to children. Here are some ways to help children get started learning about eating unfamiliar foods without forcing them to eat a bite because an adult insists.

Strategies for Helping Children Learn About Unfamiliar Foods

- Model eating unfamiliar food
- Call the unfamiliar food by name, as the adult or peers model eating the food.
- Help children think about texture, taste, and smell of the unfamiliar food.
- Use vocabulary that is familiar to the children as you describe how the unfamiliar food is similar to something they already know.
- Help children place the food into an already familiar category such as vegetable, meat, crisp, sweet, smooth, “like rice.”
- Offer the unfamiliar food many times so the children can become comfortable with the appearance, smell, and feel of the food, before they taste and swallow the food.
- Explore unfamiliar foods in non-meal settings, such as small group times or circle times. This gives children a non-threatening setting from which to explore the food.

If you are in a setting where you are required to use the “one bite” rule:

- Let children decide how big a bite to take;
- Help children save face by describing their attempts at trying. “You smelled the beans and then you tasted them.” “You tried it;”
- Avoid dismissing children’s opinions. Listen to and accept children’s thoughts about whether they like the food or not after they taste it. All of us truly like some foods and truly dislike others. Respect those likes and dislikes. Do not try to overrule them with your own likes and dislikes; and
- Allow children to spit food into a napkin, if they dislike it. Children sometimes actually vomit when they are asked to eat something very distasteful to them.