

What Is Food Chaining?



A gentle, step-by-step approach to expanding your child's diet

- ▶ Food chaining connects foods your child already accepts to new foods that are similar in taste, texture, temperature, or appearance.
- ▶ Each step in the chain is small enough to feel safe for your child — and successful for you.
- ▶ This is NOT about forcing foods. It is about building positive experiences at the table, one tiny step at a time.

The 5 Properties of Food We Use to Build Chains



Taste Texture Temperature Color Shape/appearance



When moving from one food to the next, change only ONE property at a time.

For example: same shape, same crunch — but different brand. Or same flavor — but different texture. Changing too much at once makes the jump too big.

How to Build a Food Chain: The Basic Steps

1. Start where your child is.

Identify 3–5 foods they consistently eat and enjoy. These are your anchors.

2. Notice what those foods have in common.

Is it crunchy? Mild? Yellow? Served at room temperature? That is your starting property.

3. Find a bridge food.

A food that shares most properties with the accepted food but differs in just one small way.

4. Introduce without pressure.

Place the new food on the plate near — not touching — the accepted food. No expectation to eat it yet. Avoid bribing with dessert to reward interaction.

5. Celebrate any interaction.

Touching it, smelling it, licking it, or just tolerating it on the plate is progress. Praise it.

6. Move at your child's pace.

Some steps take days. Some take weeks. There is no timeline that is too slow if it is moving forward.



Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics



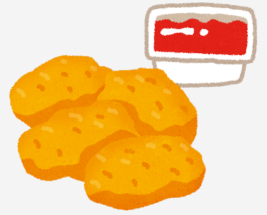
www.behavioralpediatrician.com



6810 Lyons Technology Circle suite 190, Coconut Creek
FL 33073

Food Chaining: Chicken Nuggets → Grilled Chicken

Most children take weeks to move through the early steps of this chain. Some steps may take longer. Nuggets should remain available throughout the process — they are never taken away.



Step-by-Step Food Chain

Step 1: Brand A chicken nuggets (current favorite)

Your starting point — keep serving these.
No changes yet. Just note what they like about them.

Step 2: A different brand of chicken nuggets

Same shape, same coating — just different brand.
Serve both brands on the plate together.

Step 3: Dino-shaped or different-shaped nuggets

Same breaded texture, different appearance.
Make it fun — "the dino nuggets are visiting!"

Step 4: Homemade breaded chicken strips

Same crunch, thicker cut.
Use panko breadcrumbs for similar texture.

Step 5: Baked (not fried) breaded chicken strips

Same coating, slightly softer interior.
Pair with their favorite dipping sauce.

Step 6: Unbreaded grilled chicken strips (thin)

No coating — mild seasoning only.
Cut into small pieces; serve with dip.

Step 7: Grilled or baked chicken in varied forms

Drumstick, thigh, cubed — their choice.
Celebrate this step — it's a big win!

Things to avoid:

- ✗ Removing nuggets to force the new food.
- ✗ Commenting on what they don't eat.
- ✗ Rushing past a step before it is comfortable.



www.behavioralpediatrician.com



6810 Lyons Technology Circle suite 190, Coconut Creek
FL 33073



Food Chaining: Mac & Cheese → Varied Pasta Dishes

Pasta chains tend to move at a moderate pace because the texture and appearance of pasta is fairly forgiving. Expect 2–4 weeks per step for most children. Children with texture sensitivity may move more slowly through sauce changes — and that is perfectly fine.



Step-by-Step Food Chain

Step 1. Current boxed mac & cheese (favorite brand)

Your anchor food — no changes.

Step 2. A different brand of boxed mac & cheese

Same format, slightly different flavor. Serve both brands side by side

Step 3. Mac & cheese with shells or rotini instead of elbows

Same sauce and flavor — new shape.

Step 4. Homemade mac & cheese (mild, smooth sauce)

Familiar flavor, creamier texture. Aim to match the color of their preferred brand.

Step 5. Buttered pasta (plain, same pasta shape)

Removes cheese — mild flavor, familiar texture. Use same pasta shape as previous step.

Step 6. Pasta with mild tomato or cream sauce

New sauce color and flavor — keep texture consistent.

Step 7. Pasta with simple toppings (protein, mild veggies)

Chicken, peas, or broccoli mixed in.

Things to avoid:

- ✗ Switching brands and shapes at the same time.
- ✗ Adding vegetables without warning.
- ✗ Commenting on color changes ("this one looks different") — let them discover.
- ✗ Serving the new step when your child is tired or already stressed.



www.behavioralpediatrician.com

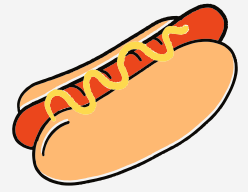


6810 Lyons Technology Circle suite 190, Coconut Creek
FL 33073

 **Beehave**
developmental & behavioral pediatrics

Food Chaining: Hot Dogs → Whole Protein Sources

Protein chains often take longer because taste and texture differences between processed and whole meat are meaningful to sensitive eaters.



Step-by-Step Food Chain

Step 1. Current hot dog brand (boiled or microwaved)

Your anchor — note how they prefer it served.

Step 2. A different brand or turkey/chicken hot dog

Same format, slightly different flavor profile. Serve alongside their usual brand to compare.

Step 3. Hot dog sliced into coins (same preparation)

Different shape — same flavor and texture.

Step 4. Chicken or turkey sausage (mild, soft)

Similar texture to hot dog — less processed. Slice into coins to mirror previous step.

Step 5. Ground turkey or chicken (very well seasoned)

Crumbled, soft — familiar seasoning bridges flavor.

Step 6. Soft-cooked chicken breast (diced small, moist)

Whole protein — soft preparation is key.

Step 7. Varied whole proteins (grilled chicken, turkey, beef)

Different preparations and seasonings accepted.



Things to avoid:

- ✗ Serving well-done or dry meat (texture will be rejected).
- ✗ Removing hot dogs suddenly — this creates anxiety around meals.
- ✗ Introducing strong-flavored proteins (lamb, fish) before milder ones.
- ✗ Making the new protein the only option at a meal.



www.behavioralpediatrician.com



6810 Lyons Technology Circle suite 190, Coconut Creek
FL 33073



Beehave

developmental & behavioral pediatrics