How to Make Food Look Like Animals: Turn Any Snack Into a Critter

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How to make food look like animals with kids, in four moves: find the body, add eyes, add one funny part, name it. Plus how gross is too gross, and safety notes.

To make food look like an animal, you need four things: a body, two eyes, one funny part and a name. A slice of toast is a face. A banana is a body. Two blueberries make it look back at you, a few pretzel sticks give it legs, and once someone says "Turtle Toast" out loud, it's a turtle. A child of five can do almost all of it, and the lopsided ones are the funniest.

I'm a parent who built Peabody, a free reading and math site, and this autumn it grew a Kitchen where a tiny chef called Crumb reads each recipe aloud. When I asked my kids what they wanted to cook, the answer was simple: anything that looks like an animal, and the sillier the better. So the Kitchen now has a Critter Kitchen, and every critter recipe is on one page: funny food for kids. Like the rest of the Kitchen, it's free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up.

This post is the part that doesn't need a recipe: how to turn whatever is already in the fridge into a critter.

The four moves

- Move: 1. Find the body · What to do: Round is a face, long is a body, a half-circle is a shell · Try: Toast, crackers, a banana, celery, a kiwi slice, a croissant
- Move: 2. Add two eyes · What to do: Two dots and it's alive · Try: Blueberries, raisins, chocolate chips, a dab of cream cheese with a raisin in it
- Move: 3. Add one funny part · What to do: Legs, ears, spots, a shell, a tail · Try: Pretzel sticks, apple slices, cucumber coins, a grape head, a strawberry nose
- Move: 4. Name it · What to do: Animal plus food, said out loud · Try: Turtle Toast, Caterpillar Crunch, Bumblebee Bagel

1. Find the body

Look at the shape before you think about the animal. Round food wants to be a face: toast becomes an owl or a bear, a cracker becomes a spider, a pancake becomes anything with ears. Long food wants to be a body: a stick of celery is a log for ladybugs to sit on, a row of grapes on a stick is a caterpillar, and a hot dog cut into eight legs curls into an octopus in the pot. A half-circle is a shell: a slice of kiwi is the whole of a kiwi turtle, and a croissant already looks like a crab before anyone touches it.

2. Add two eyes

Eyes do more work than anything else on the plate. Two blueberries on a slice of toast and the toast is looking at you. Raisins, chocolate chips and halved grapes all work, and a dab of cream cheese with a raisin pressed into it makes an eye with a white. Spreads are the glue that holds everything on: cream cheese, seed butter, nut butter, yogurt or hummus.

3. Add one funny part

One silly detail is enough to make it an animal: pretzel-stick legs on a cracker, apple-slice ears on a pancake, a strawberry nose, cucumber spots. More than one is better, and the child gets to decide when it's finished. Eight legs is a lot of pretzel sticks, and that's the point: counting them out is part of the fun.

4. Name it

Say the name out loud. Animal plus food works best, especially when the two words start with the same sound: Turtle Toast, Caterpillar Crunch, Bumblebee Bagel. Then make it come alive. Walk it across the plate, give it a voice, and ask the important question: head first or tail first? On Peabody, every critter recipe's last picture moves (the turtle's head pops out, the octopus waves), and each recipe card has a twist for next time that turns the same food into a different animal.

Let them build it

The hard part for grown-ups is keeping our hands off. A wobbly turtle is still a turtle, and the one a child built is the one they'll want to try. That isn't a trick to get vegetables in: tasting is up to them, and looking, touching, smelling and building all count. It's the idea behind Ellyn Satter's "division of responsibility" in feeding, which a lot of children's dietitians use: the grown-up decides what's offered, and the child decides whether to eat it and how much.

The jobs a five-year-old can do here are the real ones: washing fruit, spreading with a butter knife, pressing on eyes, lining up grapes and counting legs. The grown-up's jobs are the sharp knife and anything hot, like the toaster or the stove.

How gross is too gross?

Kids love gross, and the grown-ups at the table have to eat too. Here's where we drew our line for the Critter Kitchen:

- Any time: things children find in the garden and the pond. Ants, beetles, ladybugs, caterpillars, snails, spiders (cute ones), frogs and frogspawn, worms, mud and swamp slime. They're cute-gross, and that's the fun.
- Halloween only: the spooky ones, which wait for October and the Halloween treats.
- Never: anything that means dirt, bins or illness, anything from the bathroom, and any

name that makes fun of a body or a person. They put people off their food, which is the opposite of what a funny snack is for.

When the line is close, there's usually a better animal one step over it. Blueberries on celery look just like shiny beetles, so beetles on a log does the job without anyone pushing a plate away.

Safety notes for small siblings

Funny food is often made for, or near, a younger brother or sister, and some of the best critter parts are on the AAP's list of choking risks for children under 4:

- Grapes and cherry tomatoes: cut in half the long way, or in quarters.
- Hot dogs: thin strips the long way, never round coins.
- Raw carrot and celery: grated, or cut thin.
- Candy eyes and other hard or chewy candy: leave them off.
- Nut and seed butters: spread thin, never a lump.
- Toothpicks and sticks: take the food off before a little one eats it.

Each Kitchen recipe carries these notes for whatever is in it, along with an allergy swap where there is one, so picking "Peanuts" turns peanut butter into sunflower seed butter on every card. There's more on that in nut-free snacks kids can make.

Three to start with

- Kiwi turtles: a kiwi slice for a shell and grapes for the head and feet. Ten minutes, no cooking.
- Owl toast: toast, a spread, banana and blueberry eyes. A grown-up works the toaster, and the twists turn it into a bunny, a lion or a penguin.
- Octopus hot dogs: for older kids, with a grown-up cutting and at the stove. The legs curl as they cook.

The rest are on the funny food for kids page, with ages, which animal each one is, and whether it needs a grown-up at the toaster or stove. And when the critters are eaten, there's a story waiting in the free library.

Questions parents ask

How do you make food look like animals?

Start with a shape (round for a face, long for a body, a half-circle for a shell), add two eyes, then one funny part like legs or ears, and give it a name. Blueberries, raisins, pretzel sticks and fruit slices do most of the work.

What age can kids make animal snacks?

From about five, with a grown-up nearby. Young children can spread, press, line up and count; a grown-up does any cutting with a sharp knife and anything hot.

Is playing with food bad manners?

Building with food at snack time is how a lot of children get to know it. It's their snack, and making it is part of eating it. Dinner can have different rules.

Is the Kitchen free?

Yes. The Kitchen and the Critter Kitchen are free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up, and nothing your child picks or makes is sent anywhere.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-to-make-food-look-like-animals