

# **Picky Eaters**

## **Frequently asked Questions (FAQ)**

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**Question:** Help! I'm at the end of my rope. My 2 ½ year old son will only eat 3 different foods and refuses to try anything new. Whenever we sit down at the table, my husband and I never get to enjoy our meal because we fight with our son trying to get him to eat something new. All we want is to be able to enjoy a nice family mealtime without any struggles. Why is he so picky about food and what can we do about it?

--- Tired and Hungry mom

Does this sound familiar? Does every family mealtime end up in a family battle? Does your child refuse food by screaming, throwing it on the floor, and crying? If you answered yes to any of these questions, there is a good chance that your child is a picky eater.

### ***What exactly is a Picky Eater?***

Typically, children who are picky eaters are exhibiting their personal desire to exert control. Their eating behaviors can be very unpredictable and tend to fluctuate without any rhyme or reason. At one moment they may eat without any struggle and instantly they may decide that they are finished with the meal. Fortunately, children (without medical complications) are often able to eat according to their instincts about when and how much they need to eat and maintain their caloric needs. About the age that children demonstrate independence and strong preferences for foods and tastes, is also when children's gross motor skills are developing. Therefore, they might be more interested in exploring new environments rather than eating new foods.

### ***Why are children picky?***

First and foremost, parents need to realize that a child's reluctance to try a new food is completely normal during development. The term "neophobia" is often used to describe this reluctance and simply means the fear of trying anything new. In fact, the average child takes 8-10 presentations of a new food before he or she willingly accepts it. Rather than being termed "spoiled", children often have biological and developmental reasons for being picky. It is important for parents to understand that a child tastes foods differently than an adult does. They are often more sensitive to strong flavors and usually prefer bland foods. Also, the gastrointestinal tract of a child is not as mature as that of an adult and pickiness may be an instinctive protective mechanism. Interestingly, the growth rate for a toddler is about one-third to one-half of what it was when he was an infant and he may simply not need as much food to sustain development.

### ***The importance of parents' behaviors and attitudes***

Feeding is perhaps the single most important bonding moment between a parent and baby. By giving a baby his food, the parent often feels gratified and empowered. They realize the important role they play and the complete dependence the child has on the parent for survival. However, as the child becomes older and more independent the parent is needed less and less for meals. The parent may start to feel neglected and rejected. However, it is extremely necessary in the child's social and cognitive development to become more independent. Children are excellent observers and can sense the feelings of rejection that the parent is experiencing. This often leads to even more struggle. The parent's new role should be to make mealtime the most enjoyable, relaxing, and safe environment possible. Battles will only make the picky child pickier by allowing him to become even more controlling. A tense atmosphere is not conducive to a pleasant meal. Some parents will try to bribe the child into eating. This tactic often makes the child more aversive to the food. The best thing a parent can do is to change their mindset and expect the child to reject foods. All the parent can do is present the food in a non-threatening manner and allow the child to try when he or she is ready. Again, this may mean presenting the food everyday for 3 weeks before the child will attempt it. Lastly, children are keen to parents' own aversions to foods. If a parent negatively comments about a food or is picky himself, then the child is sure to imitate or develop similar behaviors. Parents's need to place their own emotional issues about eating aside and focus solely on the positive.

## ***Coping with picky eaters: tricks, tips and ideas***

The worst thing a parent can do is force the child to eat. This can lead to serious medical, developmental and relationship complications down the road. Listed below are several tips to make meals and eating easier for both parent and child:

- Offer new foods only when the child is hungry and rested
- Only present one new food at a time
- Make it fun—make a game, contest, etc. out of trying new foods
- Serve new food with favorite foods to help encourage acceptance
- Try new foods yourself—children are great observers
- Encourage your child to play with the food—depending on age, put toys in the food, build train tracks, etc
- Develop new ways to present foods—cut into neat shapes, use dips, etc
- Limit drinking—children will often drink to avoid eating and overdrinking is one of the biggest causes of picky eating
- Limit snacking—2 per day
- Allow your child to help with preparation—young kids can pick favorite plate, spoon; older kids can help cut, prepare, serve
- Encourage your child to plant a vegetable garden with you
- Design a menu with acceptable foods—parent and child must agree on the choices; each week add one new food to the menu and the child must choose it at least one time
- Don't use dessert as a reward—it makes the prize only sweeter
- Take your child grocery shopping with you
- Use fun names for foods they might not like—"peter rabbit sticks" for carrots; super duper yogurt surprise
- Write down a contract that you and the child will agree to
- Combine a favorite food with a new one—e.g. if he likes plain noodles, encourage adding red sauce to one bite
- Have weekly picnics with other children—kids imitate and learn from other children best, no matter what age

## ***Nutritional issues***

Expect your child to go through phases. One week he may only want chocolate pudding at every meal. The next week, he may think it is the worst food he ever tasted. Don't force him to eat it, just let him choose what he will eat. When introducing table foods, don't worry about how much he or she will eat. Children under 12 months are still getting the bulk of their nutrition from milk and formula. When he or she turns his head away, they are signaling that they are finished with the food. Don't force him, just present it later. As your child becomes a toddler, the caloric requirement is on average 1,000 per day to sustain growth and nutrition. This can be divided into 3 meals and 2 snacks. By talking with your pediatrician, you can determine your child's specific needs for growth and nutrition. If your child refuses all fruits and vegetables and healthy proteins, encourage nibble trays with a variety of munchy foods. Use avocados, yogurt, banana bites, and eggs mixed in foods. Make yogurt smoothies, add tofu and fruit for an extra boost. Add applesauce to meals to sneak in fruit. Talk with a nutritionist for extensive ideas for sneaking in nutrition.

## ***Effects of picky behaviors***

Most parents want to know if their picky baby or toddler will always have to deal with these issues. Provided there are no medical or physiological reasons for your child's behaviors, most children can and will grow up to be "typical" eaters. One of the best ways to prevent a feeding problem is to teach your child to feed himself as early as possible and encourage healthy and smart choices. Meals should always be enjoyable and pleasant. Negative emotions associated with eating at a young age can carryover into adolescence and adulthood.

Encourage independence and teach them about the importance of eating well-balanced meals. Parents should always provide nutritional foods and trust their children to make the right choices. Never punish, bribe, force or even reward the child for specific behaviors. If he refuses to eat, do not punish him by sending him to his room or taking away his favorite activity. Simply encourage him to stay at the table and continue the socialization of the mealtime. He doesn't have to eat, but he does have to participate.

### Further Resources

Always consult your pediatrician to rule out any medical explanations for your child's picky behaviors

- Keeping your baby healthy William Sears, M.D. and Martha Sears, R.N.
- Feeding the picky eater William Sears, M.D. and Martha Sears, R.N.
- The family nutrition book William Sears, M.D. and Martha Sears, R.N.
- American Academy of Pediatrics: Guide to your child's nutrition William H. Dietz, M.D., Ph.D. and Loraine Stern, M.D.
- Child of mine: feeding with love and good sense Ellyn Satter
- Getting your child to eat, but not too much Ellyn Satter
- Coping with a picky eater William Wilkoff, M.D.
- [www.parentsplace.com](http://www.parentsplace.com)
- [www.parenthoodweb.com](http://www.parenthoodweb.com)
- [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)
- [www.parenthub.com](http://www.parenthub.com)