

Picky Eater



Reasons why children are picky eaters...

- Some children really despise the tastes of certain foods.
- Some children cannot tolerate the texture of certain foods.
- Some children want to feed themselves.
- Some children may eat more than enough on one day, and then barely eat the next day.
- Some children are overwhelmed by the large quantities of food on their plate.
- Some children are asserting their independence by refusing to eat.

To encourage healthy eating habits...

- Buy nutritious foods and offer them in a neutral fashion.
- Allow the child to feed herself, using her hands, if she chooses - even though she will probably be quite messy.
- Serve the child small quantities. A serving for a young child is only about one tablespoonful per year of age.
- Serve new foods in very small quantities, next to familiar foods.
- Provide a relaxing environment for snacks and mealtimes, and have a family member sit with the child.
- Remember that you are your child's best example, so make sure your child sees you eating healthy foods and drinking healthy beverages.
- Offer your child choices about the foods he will eat. For example, say "Would you like oatmeal or cold cereal for breakfast?" or "Would you like to have an apple or a banana for your snack?"

Picky eating is a very common concern of parents whose children are 18 months to about 3 years. Picky eaters will eat only a limited variety of foods (also referred to as 'food jags') and small quantities of foods. These children are worrisome for their parents who wonder if they are getting enough to eat. If you are especially concerned about food and were brought up with strict rules about eating, this may be a difficult time for you.

If you have a picky eater, the first thing you may want to do is contact your health care provider and find out if your child's weight and height are within the normal range. It may be reassuring to know that your child is not likely to starve. Usually picky eaters grow just fine.

- Meals and snacks should occur about the same time each day. Typically plan about 3 small meals a day with 2 - 3 healthy snacks in between.
- Help your child focus on eating by turning off the television and keeping toys away from the table.
- Help your child focus on his body's signals for hunger and fullness. For example, say "It seems like your tummy is full, since you stopped eating your cereal." Or say, "You're asking for a snack, so your tummy must be hungry."

An expert in child development, T. Berry Brazelton, MD, believes that 1-and-2-year-old children will fare quite well on this minimal daily diet during this time of intense negativism:

- One pint of milk or its equivalent in cheese, yogurt or ice cream.
- Two ounces of iron-containing protein (meat or an egg) or cereals fortified with iron.
- One ounce of orange juice or fresh fruit.
- One multivitamin, to cover uneaten vegetables.

This recommendation was developed in an effort to help parents to allow their children to be in control of most of their feeding choices. Brazelton states that “a rounded diet cannot be a goal for the second year.” (Touchpoints: The Essential Reference)

Toddler independence and power struggles...

Because your child is working so hard right now at being his own person, it is easy to get into power struggles. Be sure to check yourself. You might be too controlling if you make your child:

- Stay at the table until she has eaten all of a certain food, such as vegetables.
- “Clean his plate,” by eating all the food.
- Eat everything before she can eat dessert. (Parents can completely avoid this temptation by offering fruit for dessert instead of sweets.)
- Get by on only three meals a day, without snacks.
- Eat certain foods in a certain order.

Many toddlers develop certain favorite foods, and these preferences, also known as “food jags,” may last for weeks or months. For example, the toddler might insist on having cheese for every meal, no matter what else is served. The child will likely become inconsolable if cheese is not served. The solution is simple: Provide it. Food preferences will come and go.

To decrease mealtime madness...

- Avoid force feeding your child.
- Avoid coaxing, begging or urging your child to eat.
- Avoid bribery, like saying, “If you’ll eat two bites of green beans I’ll give you a cookie.”
- Avoid threats, like saying, “If you don’t eat your carrots we won’t read a bedtime story.”
- Avoid allowing your child to fill up on large quantities of liquid. Give liquids in a cup and limit fluid one hour before a meal.
- Avoid making your child sit at the table for long periods of time. Anything over fifteen minutes, when your child is refusing to eat, is too long.
- Never use any form of physical or verbal punishment to make your child eat. Keep in mind that eating patterns become more regular as your child leaves the ‘toddler’ years and enters the ‘preschool’ years. If you focus on healthy, stress-free eating, your child can develop healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime.

Dealing with picky eating can be challenging. Sometimes professional assistance is needed and getting help is a sign of strength. Call your healthcare provider or county health department and ask for a Child Guidance professional.

REMEMBER: IT IS THE PARENT’S JOB TO PROVIDE THE CHILD NUTRITIOUS FOODS; IT IS THE CHILD’S JOB TO EAT.



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