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Family Matters

Improving Health Together

August 2025 Newsletter

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Picky Eaters: Challenges and Tips

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Selective eating is a common behavior in childhood. This behavior can cause considerable stress for parents/caregivers and can have a negative impact on family relationships. Often this is a phase that is outgrown, but there are some practical strategies that can make mealtimes more manageable and balanced.



- **Be patient and persistent:** It may take up to 20 exposures before a child accepts a new food, and even longer before they begin to enjoy it. Unfortunately, parents often give up after 3–4 times because of mealtime stress.
- **Do not force eating:** Encourage them to try new foods, but do not get into fights about it. Forcing a child to eat can create negative associations with food and potentially worsen fussy eating habits. It is helpful if children arrive at a meal hungry enough to want to eat.
- **Involving children in meal planning and preparation:** This can increase their interest in trying new foods. Look at recipes together; be willing to try new and different things and even take them shopping with you. Grow a garden in the backyard or in containers on your deck. Then, have a tasting party at home to help them get excited about the new foods.
- **Offer a variety of foods:** Expose children to a wide range of flavors and textures. This may mean trying a variety of new foods yourself to model the behavior you want to see from your children.
- **Establish mealtime routines.** Try to eat your dinner around the same time every night; keep distractions like phones and TV out of mealtimes; talk about pleasant topics so kids associate positive feelings with mealtimes. Eating together puts the emphasis on the social aspect of eating, rather than the food itself, which can be beneficial. The more positive and happier the mealtimes, the more likely kids will learn to like the foods eaten during those meals.

Helping families increase physical activity and enjoy healthy foods ...

Let's Talk

Talk with your children about meal planning and their favorite foods. Consider asking them these questions before you shop for the week:

- What should we have for dinner this week? Allow them to choose one meal, within reason.
- What are your favorite vegetables? How do you prefer them cooked? Some older children will be able to tell you how they like a certain food prepared, e.g. broccoli roasted versus steamed. If they are younger, you might ask them if they like their broccoli crunchy versus soft.

Be sure to include these items for the week and point out to your child when you are doing so. They may feel empowered just knowing they had a say in what was prepared for the week.

When it comes time to preparing the food, ask your child if they want to help you prepare it, offering them a simple task such as tearing the lettuce, mixing a dressing, or mashing the potatoes. This, too, may make them more likely to try and accept the food they are helping prepare.

When mealtime comes along, offer a small portion of a new food alongside a familiar favorite. This can be a useful technique for getting children to try new foods. When using this technique for meal planning, it assures that your child will still have a balanced meal and get enough food for that day, not leaving them feeling hungry. This way, children build on the familiar and preferred foods they know best.

Lastly, avoid being a short order cook for your family. If your child does not like or doesn't seem to be eating the food that you have prepared for a meal or snack, just say to them "that's OK" and let it be. Avoid the temptation to return to the stove and cook foods that you know your child will eat. If your child refuses a meal or snack, there will be another one in a few hours and he or she should be able to wait until then. When children are hungry, because they choose not to eat, they will be more likely to eat what is offered next time.

Recipe for Healthy Fun



- Cut food into fun and easy shapes with cookie cutters.
- Encourage your child to invent and help prepare new snacks.
- Create new tastes by mixing two or more food groups together to make interesting pairings.
- Name a food your child helps create. Make a big deal of serving "Maria's Salad" or "Peter's Sweet Potatoes" for dinner.

While picky eating is classified as someone with a strong preference or aversion to specific foods, remember this is a short phase and can be outgrown. Picky eating can be a normal part of many children's development, so rest assured that it is common and can go away over time.