

Picky Eaters

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30 – 50% of parents of preschoolers describe their child as a picky eater. So, let's just accept that kids having strong opinions about what they eat is a **normal** phase! There *are* steps we can take:

Start with Empathy

We *all* have food preferences. Some of us are adventurous eaters, some like the same few foods over and over. As adults, we have a lot of control over our food choices: what we buy and when we eat it. Our young children have very little control over their food choices.

Imagine being at a restaurant where the waiter brought you the foods that *they* like that *they* think are healthy for you and then insisted that you eat everything that they brought. And further imagine that you didn't speak very many words of the waiter's language and couldn't communicate with them why you don't like what you've been offered. You might well be a "picky eater" in that situation!

Let's start from this place of empathy and then figure out how to offer/encourage without pressuring or forcing the issue. Toddlers are figuring out independence and are ripe for power struggles. If you turn food into a battle ground, no one wins! If you try to force a child to eat, they eat less.

Know how much they need to eat

Babies grow so fast in the first year that they have very high caloric requirements. But then that growth slows down, so a toddler's appetite will decrease. It is helpful to know how much they need to take in per day: A child age 1 to 3 needs about 40 calories per inch tall. Preschoolers need about 1400 calories total. You can also think of serving sizes as one tablespoon per year of age. A meal for a 3-year-old could be 3 tablespoons each of peas, noodles, and chicken. If your child is gaining weight well and has plenty of energy, that's a good sign that they're getting enough food.

How much variety do they need?

Well, all of us would benefit from a widely varied diet of healthy foods. But, young children may naturally have a more limited range of preferred foods than adults. As long as they're eating some protein, some calcium sources, and some good sources of fiber and healthy fats, they should be fine.

Get them Involved

Take your child grocery shopping with you, or to a farmer's market. Let them choose things they want to try. Let your child help you to prepare the food (scrub vegetables, stir the salad) or set the table. Let them choose favorite familiar foods to accompany the new option. Offer choices – don't ask "do you want a vegetable or not?" Instead ask "do you want broccoli or do you want carrots?"

Role Model / Communal Meal

Make meal times relaxed and social. Serve the same food to everyone, if possible. Talk about what you like about your food. If there's something you are OK with eating, but don't love, you can say that "I don't love this, but I know it's good for me, so I'll eat some of it, then I'll eat the other things that I like better."

Introducing the New Food

Give a very small taster serving – a single pea, or a shred of cheese. Allow them to touch it, sniff it, lick it – do whatever they need to feel comfortable trying it out. Respond positively to any attempts, but don't pressure them into eating it all. If they choose not to eat it, say "OK, we'll try again at another meal." Wait a few days before trying again. Plan to offer a new food several times before it's fully embraced. The first few times, offer just one bite. Over time you can give them a full serving.

Use food bridges: think of something they already like – what new food is similar to that? Think about textures, colors, and tastes. If they like mushy foods, they'll prefer mashed potatoes to french fries. If they like crisp things, try kale chips and apple slices. If they don't like green food, try carrots, cauliflower, sweet potato, jicama. If they love chicken nuggets, try fish sticks.

Many parents go for the technique of "hiding" vegetables – blending lots of veggies into spaghetti sauce or dip, or mixing grated carrots into other things. Some nutritionists recommend this, some say it's better to teach them to like the whole food. If you have a super-picky eater who has trust issues about foods (e.g. I won't eat blueberries because there was that one time I had a bad blueberry and now I don't trust them), then I don't recommend this this will just reinforce that distrust.

It may help to try new foods at snack time when they're hungry, and not at a mealtime when you're hoping for the whole family to have a relaxing time together.

Make trying new foods a fun activity. Try adding a dip – many kids will eat anything they can dip. Do taste tests, crunch tests, cut food into fun shapes, or go on a food field trip to learn where it's grown.

Stick to the Familiar in Unfamiliar Environments

When your child is on vacation, or starting at a new school, or otherwise outside of their normal routine, they may need familiar foods to calm and reassure them.

Sometimes Foods

If you make any food a "forbidden fruit" that only increases its appeal. Go ahead and have fast food, or ice cream, or candy, or whatever. But do it in moderation, and explain that it's a 'sometimes food.'

Keep Trying

Kids tend to be pickier about new foods from age 2 to 5, an age when they may cling to familiar routines. As they get older, they make get more flexible. So once your child starts elementary school, try re-introducing things they rejected in their toddler years. They may be more flexible now. As they move toward their tweens and teens, they may try anything that their friends eat!

The Super Picky Eater

Some kids take picky eating to a whole other level. (Especially kids with sensory issues or autism.) If you've tried all the usual tips, and they haven't worked, then check out this post to learn more:

<https://gooddayswithkids.com/super-picky-eater/>

Sources for more info on picky eaters: <https://www.mottchildren.org/posts/your-child/picky-eaters;>
www.zerotothree.org/resources/1072-how-to-handle-picky-eaters