

Parenting a “Picky” Eater

Do you know a “picky eater”? “Picky” eating is when a child (or adult) refuses foods often or eats the same foods over and over. Picky eating usually peaks in the toddler and preschool years. Many parents worry that their picky eater is not getting enough nutrition to grow. But in most cases, they are. If you keep a food diary for a day by writing down everything your child eats, you’ll possibly find that they are eating more than you thought.

Ellyn Satter, MS RD LCSW BCD, a researcher and practitioner in the field of paediatric feeding practices, explains that both parents and children have their own “jobs” to do when it comes to eating. Parents are responsible for providing healthy foods at meal- and snack-times. Children are responsible for what and how much they eat. This helps children learn what it feels like to be hungry and then full—and how to make healthy choices based on this awareness, for example eating when hungry and stopping when full.

The Role of Parents

Research has found that parents’ food preferences are linked to their children's food preferences (Borah-Giddens & Falciglia, 1993). This is probably not a big surprise since we are more likely to prepare the foods that we enjoy, so our children are more familiar with that group of foods than others. Familiarity with foods is key, as a child may need to be exposed to new foods more than 10 times before they even try it.

What can you do to help your child enjoy a range of foods?

- **Eat a range of healthy foods yourself.** Make sure that your own choices are in line with the foods you want your child to eat and enjoy.
- **Prepare meals together.** Having a hand in making the meal increases the chances that your child will taste her “creation.” Have your little one assist with measuring, pouring, or stirring.
- **Offer your child a choice.** Occasionally let your child decide if the family will have peas or beans at tea that night.
- **Multiple Exposures.** Don't introduce a new item just the once and then forget about it if your child didn't like it the first time. It can take up to 10 exposures before a child may taste a food. Similarly, it can take multiple tastes for our taste buds to get used to something new.
- **Encourage a taste.** After exposing a child to a new food a few times, encourage them to at least taste it. They don't have to eat the whole piece of new food that is on their plate, but encourage even at least a lick.

- **Avoid showing disgust or disinterest when trying new foods.** A study found that mothers who showed (with their facial expressions, body language or words) that they didn't want to try a new food had children who also tended to refuse new foods (Carruth & Skinner, 2000). In short, your young child will probably be less willing to try something new if you haven't tasted it. And if you are a "picky eater" yourself, then your child is likely to imitate you in this behaviour, just as she imitates the way you talk on the phone or the way you wave good-bye to her each morning at child care.

What to Avoid

There are two big pitfalls to avoid when trying to nurture healthy eating habits in your child:

- **Forcing your child to eat.** The fact is that forcing children to eat usually leads to the child eating less. Forcing also teaches children to rely on others to tell them how much to eat and what they are feeling. This does not lead to healthy eating habits or good self-esteem. In fact, some research has shown that forcing children to eat can actually make picky eating behaviour worse (Sanders, Patel, Le Grice, & Shepherd, 1993).
- **Nagging or making deals with your child.** "Just two more bites, just two more bites!" "If you eat your vegetables, you will get dessert." Strategies like these tend not to work in the long run. Children who learn to make deals about eating quickly learn to make deals and ask for rewards for doing other things—like brushing teeth or getting their shoes on. And soon they won't do anything unless there is a reward for it!

What About Dessert?

How do you handle your little one's "biscuit cravings" when they insist they are done with dinner (after 3 noodles) but still have room for something sweet? The following are some ideas for handling this common dilemma.

- **Serve a small treat with your child's dinner** (for example, one biscuit or a small cupcake). Yes, he may eat it first or he may eat only the treat. But over time, your child will get hungry and eat the other, healthy foods as he learns that sweets are *part* of a meal, just not the only part. Soon, you might even find that he leaves the sweet on the side, opting to eat the healthier foods first.
- **Serve a small treat at the end of the meal** regardless of how much your child has eaten. Again, this teaches your child that sweets, when eaten in moderate servings, have their place. It also takes away the power of the dessert being a big, special reward that children are constantly pining away for. When you avoid negotiating "if you eat this, you get that," you

also eliminate a big power struggle. You may find that your child eats more of the healthy foods on his plate as a result.

- **Eliminate sweets altogether.** Some families believe that cookies, cakes, etc. are not appropriate for their family's diet. Instead, try offering fresh fruit or cheese to end the meal.

However, if you feel your child's limited eating is more than being a 'picky eater'; has been present for an extended period; or is affecting their overall nutrition and health then please speak to a paediatric dietician, paediatric occupation therapist or speech pathologist who may be able to offer support.

References:

Thanks to- "How to Handle Picky Eaters", Zero to Three: Early Connections Last a Lifetime. Apr 18, 2010

Borah-Giddens, J., & Falciglia, G. A. (1993). A meta-analysis of the relationship in food preferences between parents and children. *Journal of Nutrition Education, 25*, 102–107.

Carruth, B. R., & Skinner, J. D. (2000). Revisiting the picky eater phenomenon: Neophobic behaviors of young children. *Journal of the American College of Nutrition, 19*, 771–780.

Gibbs, J. (2006, Jan-Mar). Working with picky eaters: The toddler years. *Family and Consumer Sciences Quarterly Media Packet*, Michigan State University Extension, East Lansing, MI.

Lerner, C., & Parlakian, R. (2007). Healthy from the start: How feeding nurtures your young child's body, heart, and mind. ZERO TO THREE: Washington, DC.

Martins, Y. (2002). Try it, you'll like it! Early dietary experiences and food acceptance patterns. *The Journal of Pediatric Nutrition and Development, 98*, 12–20.

Sanders, M. R., Patel, R. K., Le Grice, B., & Shepherd, R. W. (1993). Children with persistent feeding difficulties: An observational analysis of the feeding interactions of problem and non-problem eaters. *Health Psychology, 12*, 64–73.

Satter, E. (1990). The feeding relationship: Problems and interventions. *Journal of Pediatrics, 117*(Suppl.), 181–190.

Cathey, M., & Gaylord, N. (2004). Picky eating: A toddler's approach to mealtime. *Pediatric Nursing, 30*(2), 101–109.