



Picky Eaters

It is very normal for children of all ages to have a few food dislikes. About 20% of toddlers and young children are picky eaters and have several food dislikes. Children who are picky eaters may choose 1 or 2 preferred foods and refuse to eat other foods for weeks at a time. They may also be unpredictable about their food preferences, with their predilection for a particular food varying on a day-to-day basis. It is common for young children to dislike foods with a bitter or spicy taste. Often, children will reject a food because it is difficult to chew. Try not to worry too much about this behavior, since most children outgrow it by the early school years.

Tips for Picky Eaters

- Trust your child's appetite to balance out his caloric needs.
- Avoid praising your child for eating. Don't give bribes or rewards for meeting your eating expectations. Children should eat to satisfy their appetite, not to please the parent.
- Keep the mealtime atmosphere pleasant. Try to make it an important family event. Draw your children into friendly conversation. Talk about fun subjects unrelated to food. Avoid turning it into a time for criticism or struggle over control.
- Try to serve a main dish that everyone in the family likes. Some children don't like foods that are mixed together, such as casseroles. Try reintroducing such dishes when your child is older.
- Allow occasional substitutes for the main dish, but avoid getting into the habit of being a "short-order cook." Have a few nutritious, easy-to-prepare items on hand (cereal, simple sandwiches, yogurt) as substitutes for the main entrée. Your child should understand that you eventually want him to eat the main dish that has been prepared for the whole family.
- Respect any strong food dislikes. If your child has a few strong food dislikes (especially any food that makes him gag), do not serve that food to him even when it is prepared as part of the family meal.
- Don't become overly-concerned or make your child feel guilty for refusing vegetables. This is very common, and a well-balanced diet is still possible. Continue to encourage nutritious foods in general. Try serving vegetables that are well-cooked and easy to chew. Consider getting creative and using fun names (broccoli trees, carrot spears, etc) to encourage vegetable consumption. Serving dips and spreads may also help. You can even "sneak" vegetables into certain dishes or incorporate them into smoothies.
- Discourage complaining about food at mealtimes. Initiate a rule that it's okay to decline a serving of a particular food or to push it to the side of the plate, but complaining or whining about it is unacceptable.
- Encourage your child to taste new foods. Many tastes are acquired, and your child may eventually learn that he likes a food that he initially refused. Research indicates that it may take seeing other people eat a new food 10 times before a child is even willing to taste it. Then, it may take another 10 times of tasting it before they develop a liking for it. Don't try to rush this normal process of adapting to new foods.
- Avoid pressure or punishment at mealtime. Don't pressure, beg, or bribe your child to eat all foods. Don't punish your child for refusing to take one bite of a new food. It will only lead to liking that food less over time. If your child has a stubborn, strong-willed nature, pressure around eating can progress to a power struggle, which in turn prolongs the picky eating.
- Don't argue about dessert. An unnecessary area of friction for picky eaters is a rule that, if you don't clean your plate, you can't have any dessert. A better approach is to allow your child one small portion of dessert no matter what he eats. And remember--desserts don't always have to be sweets; they can be more nutritious foods like fruits or yogurt.
- Don't argue about a bedtime snack. If your child complains about bedtime hunger, avoid a long discussion. Give him a small, plain snack (such as cereal) before it is time to brush his teeth.
- Don't extend mealtime. Don't keep your child sitting at the dinner table after the rest of the family is done. This will only cause your child to develop unpleasant associations with mealtime. If he suddenly wants to eat, give him 5 extra minutes to do so.