

Surviving a "Picky" Eater

Help support your child's healthy eating!



"Picky" Eating is Normal

Keep serving healthy foods for a healthy child!

Many young children go through a stage of very selective eating. "Food jags," sometimes called "picky eating," are a natural part of children's desire to make their own choices. As long as a child is growing and has plenty of energy, you usually don't need to be overly concerned about how much they eat of a specific food, or if they try everything on their plate. Stop thinking of the child as a "picky" eater and instead think of them as a "cautious" eater. This simple switch can help you put yourself in their shoes and provide gentle guidance.

Guiding a Cautious Eater

1 Give praise for trying new foods

Give children specific, non-judgmental praise for trying a new food. For example, you can say "You tasted okra for the first time!" Take note of when children show any signs of accepting new foods, even if it's just putting a small amount on their plate. Avoid personal statements like "I'm so glad you ate your peas," and say something like "You tried the peas! What did you think of them?"

2 Include children in choosing

When shopping with children, let them be the "Produce Picker." Or, give them a choice between two vegetables, like zucchini or carrots for dinner. This helps empower them to make healthy choices and feel involved in meal preparation.

3 Serve a familiar meal

Introduce one new food at a time. Offering several new foods at a meal may be overwhelming. Making sure there is always at least one "safe food" a child will consistently eat at each meal can help avoid mealtime meltdowns.

4 Be a role model

Try new foods with them! Seeing you eating and enjoying healthy foods has a powerful effect. It sends children a message that healthy eating is a normal part of your life.

5 Try and try again

Don't be discouraged if your child does not enjoy a new food right away. Continue to offer the food and invite your child to try it. Children may need to try a new food 10–15 times before they like it.

6 Talk about food with your child

Shopping, cooking, and meal time are great opportunities to talk to your child about the color, texture, and tastes of foods. This helps children learn about new foods, build familiarity with them, and ultimately be excited to try them.

7 Check in about hunger and fullness

Children know when they are still hungry or have had enough to eat. Encourage them to tune in to their hunger and fullness cues at meals. Before removing a plate, ask, "I see you only ate half of your dinner, are you still hungry?"

8 Give foods silly names

Try calling broccoli "tiny trees" or a spinach salad "superhero salad." Children may find them more appealing to eat.

9 Be patient

For most children "cautious" eating is temporary. Try not to make a big deal about it and most likely these behaviors will end by school age. It can also help to make sure children have enough time to eat. A child is unlikely to try a new food if they feel rushed through their meal.

10 Aim to keep mealtimes pleasant

Children have a better time with eating when they enjoy meals. Take the pressure off the food and engage in conversation about their day.



Avoid Common Mistakes

Tips for what to avoid

It is very tempting to try to “get a child to eat” with tricks or bribes. However, these strategies often backfire and increase the struggle. And, in the long-run, they do not help children build a healthy relationship with food. Look through the list of common pitfalls below to see if any of these sound familiar. Work to reduce your use of these strategies and replace them with the tips on the previous page.

Tip: Check in and say: "I see you only ate half your dinner, are you still hungry?"

Common Pitfalls

- **Using sweets as a bribe.** “No dessert unless you finish your vegetables.” This approach may seem like a good one, but allowing treats only if a child eats vegetables makes the vegetables seem even worse, and make the sweets seem even more special. Instead, gently encourage children to try the vegetables and role model eating them yourself.
- **Pressuring your child to eat more when they are no longer hungry.** Forcing a child to eat more food, even more healthy food, promotes overeating. Trust children’s appetite and teach them to follow their hunger and fullness cues. If they don’t seem hungry at meals, try spacing them out and serving smaller snacks. This will help your child to be ready to eat when you serve main meals. If they say their tummy is full, trust that and don’t force them to keep eating.
- **Becoming a short order cook.** Make the same meal for the entire family. Not only is this less work for you, it helps children become familiar with a wider variety of foods. The more foods children try, the more they learn to like and accept.
- **Insisting your child eat spicy or complex dishes.** Keep in mind that your child’s taste buds are more sensitive than yours. His or her food dislikes may seem strange to you, but may be very strong for your child. You’ve had a lifetime to try foods and build up a taste for them, but for your child, eating food is still a relatively new experience. Respect your child’s desire to eat plain foods and for foods not to touch.

Stay Positive



Avoid criticizing or labeling your child as a picky eater. Instead, stay **positive** and focus on your child’s positive eating behaviors. Your positive attitude will **minimize** stress during mealtimes and will create a healthy eating environment for your child. Remember hungry children **will** eat, and a child who is consistently fed will not let themselves starve, so serve healthy foods at every meal.

