

Children's nutrition: 10 tips for picky eaters

Children's nutrition doesn't have to be frustrating. Consider these strategies to avoid power struggles and help the picky eater in your family eat a balanced diet.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Is your preschooler refusing to eat anything other than chicken nuggets? Or would your toddler rather play than eat anything at all?

If children's nutrition is a sore topic in your household, you're not alone. Many parents worry about what their children eat — and don't eat. However, most kids get plenty of variety and nutrition in their diets over the course of a week. Until your child's food preferences mature, consider these tips for preventing mealtime battles.

1. Respect your child's appetite — or lack of one

If your child isn't hungry, don't force a meal or snack. Likewise, don't bribe or force your child to eat certain foods or clean his or her plate. This might only ignite — or reinforce — a power struggle over food. In addition, your child might come to associate mealtime with anxiety and frustration or become less sensitive to his or her own hunger and fullness cues.

Serve small portions to avoid overwhelming your child and give him or her the opportunity to independently ask for more.

2. Stick to the routine

Serve meals and snacks at about the same times every day. If your child chooses not to eat a meal, a regular snack time will offer an opportunity to eat nutritious food. You can provide milk or 100 percent juice with the food, but offer water between meals and snacks. Allowing your child to fill up on juice, milk or snacks throughout the day might decrease his or her appetite for meals.

3. Be patient with new foods

Young children often touch or smell new foods, and might even put tiny bits in their mouths and then take them back out again. Your child might need repeated exposure to a new food before he or she takes the first bite.

Encourage your child by talking about a food's color, shape, aroma and texture — not whether it tastes good. Serve new foods along with your child's favorite foods. Keep serving your child healthy choices until they become familiar and preferred.

4. Don't be a short-order cook

Preparing a separate meal for your child after he or she rejects the original meal might promote picky eating. Encourage your child to stay at the table for the designated mealtime — even if he or she doesn't eat.

5. Make it fun

Serve broccoli and other veggies with a favorite dip or sauce. Cut foods into various shapes with cookie cutters. Offer breakfast foods for dinner. Serve a variety of brightly colored foods.

6. Recruit your child's help

At the grocery store, ask your child to help you select fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods. Don't buy anything that you don't want your child to eat. At home, encourage your child to help you rinse veggies, stir batter or set the table.

7. Set a good example

If you eat a variety of healthy foods, your child is more likely to follow suit.

8. Be creative

Add chopped broccoli or green peppers to spaghetti sauce, top cereal with fruit slices, or mix grated zucchini and carrots into casseroles and soups.

9. Minimize distractions

Turn off the television and other electronic gadgets during meals. This will help your child focus on eating. Keep in mind that television advertising might also encourage your child to desire sugary or less nutritious foods.

10. Don't offer dessert as a reward

Withholding dessert sends the message that dessert is the best food, which might only increase your child's desire for sweets. You might select one or two nights a week as dessert nights, and skip dessert the rest of the week — or redefine dessert as fruit, yogurt or other healthy choices.

If you're concerned that picky eating is compromising your child's growth and development, consult your child's doctor. He or she can plot your child's growth on a growth chart. In addition, consider recording the types and amounts of food your child eats for three days. The big picture might help ease your worries. A food log can also help your child's doctor determine any problems.

In the meantime, remember that your child's eating habits won't likely change overnight — but the small steps you take each day can help promote a lifetime of healthy eating.

Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters



Do any of the statements below remind you of your child?

“Ebony will only eat peanut butter sandwiches.”

“Michael won’t eat anything green, just because of the color.”

“Bananas used to be Matt’s favorite food, but now he won’t even touch them.”

Your child may eat only a certain type of food or refuse foods based on a certain color or texture. He or she may also play at the table and may not want to eat. Don’t worry if your child has some picky eating behaviors. Picky eating behavior is common for many children from the age of 2 to 5 years. As long as your child is growing as the doctor suggests, he or she is most likely eating enough to be healthy. If you have concerns about your child’s growth or eating behavior, talk to your child’s doctor.

How to cope with picky eating

Your child’s picky eating is temporary. If you don’t make it a big deal, it will usually end before school age. Try the following tips to help you deal with your child’s picky eating behavior in a positive way. Check the ones that work for you and your child.

- Let your kids be “produce pickers.”** Let them pick out fruits and veggies at the store.
- Have your child help you prepare meals.** Children learn about food and get excited about tasting food when they help make meals. Let them add ingredients, scrub veggies, or help stir food.



- Offer choices.** Rather than ask, “Do you want broccoli for dinner?” ask “Which would you like for dinner, broccoli or cauliflower?”
- Enjoy each other while eating family meals together.** Talk about what family members did during the day, what made you laugh, or what you did for fun. Turn off the TV and keep phones away from the table to focus on family time.
- Offer the same foods for the whole family.** Serve the same meal to adults and kids. Let them see you enjoy a variety of healthy foods. Talk about the colors, shapes, and textures on the plate.



Trying new foods

Your child may not want to try new foods. It is normal for children to reject foods they have never tried before. Here are some tips to get your child to try new foods:



Let your kids learn by serving themselves. Teach them to take small amounts at first. Tell your kids that they can get more food if they are still hungry.

■ **Start with small portions.** Let your kids try small portions of new foods that you enjoy. Give them a small taste at first and be patient with them. When they develop a taste for more types of foods, it's easier to plan family meals.

■ **Offer one new food at a time.** Serve something that you know your child likes along with the new food. Offering more new foods all at once could be too much for your child.

■ **Be a good role model.** Try new foods yourself. Describe their taste, texture, and smell to your child.

■ **Offer new foods first.** Your child is most hungry at the start of a meal.

■ **Offer new foods many times.** Sometimes, new foods take time. Kids don't always take to new foods right away. It may take up to a dozen tries for a child to accept a new food.



They learn from watching you. Eat fruits and vegetables and your child will too.

Make food fun!

Help your child develop healthy eating habits by getting him or her involved and making food fun! Get creative in the kitchen with these cool ideas. Check the ones you try at home, and be sure to add your own ideas, too!



Make meals and memories together. It's a lesson they'll use for life.

Cut a 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.

Our family ideas to make food fun:



For more great tips on these and other subjects, go to:

ChooseMyPlate.gov/preschoolers/



Phrases that *HELP* and *HINDER*



As the caregiver, you play the biggest role in your child's eating behavior. What you say has an impact on developing healthy eating habits. Negative phrases can easily be changed into positive, helpful ones!

Phrases that *HINDER*

INSTEAD OF ...

Eat that for me.
If you do not eat one more bite, I will be mad.

Phrases like these teach your child to eat for your approval and love. This can lead your child to have unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about food and about themselves.

INSTEAD OF ...

You're such a big girl; you finished all your peas.
Jenny, look at your sister. She ate all of her bananas.
You have to take one more bite before you leave the table.

Phrases like these teach your child to ignore fullness. It is better for kids to stop eating when full or satisfied than when all of the food has been eaten.

INSTEAD OF ...

See, that didn't taste so bad, did it?

This implies to your child that he or she was wrong to refuse the food. This can lead to unhealthy attitudes about food or self.

INSTEAD OF ...

No dessert until you eat your vegetables.
Stop crying and I will give you a cookie.

Offering some foods, like dessert, in reward for finishing others, like vegetables, makes some foods seem better than others. Getting a food treat when upset teaches your child to eat to feel better. This can lead to overeating.

Phrases that *HELP*

TRY ...

This is kiwi fruit; it's sweet like a strawberry.
These radishes are very crunchy!

Phrases like these help to point out the sensory qualities of food. They encourage your child to try new foods.

TRY ...

Is your stomach telling you that you're full?
Is your stomach still making its hungry growling noise?
Has your tummy had enough?

Phrases like these help your child to recognize when he or she is full. This can prevent overeating.

TRY ...

Do you like that?
Which one is your favorite?
Everybody likes different foods, don't they?

Phrases like these make your child feel like he or she is making the choices. It also shifts the focus toward the taste of food rather than who was right.



TRY ...

We can try these vegetables again another time. Next time would you like to try them raw instead of cooked?
I am sorry you are sad. Come here and let me give you a big hug.

Reward your child with attention and kind words. Comfort him or her with hugs and talks. Show love by spending time and having fun together.

Tips For Picky Eaters

Post Test – August 2018

**Please keep this test and certificate in your files for Licensing.
You do not need to send it in to our office or the State.**

1. You should never force or bribe a child to eat a meal or snack if they are not hungry.
True or False?
2. Letting a child fill up on juice, milk or snacks will _____ their appetite for meals .
3. A child may need _____ _____ to a new food before they try it for the first time.
4. Turning off the _____ and other electronic gadgets will help a child focus on eating.
5. Have your children help prepare meals. They can add ingredients, _____ _____ or help stir food.
6. Serve the same meals to adults and kids. Let them see you enjoy a _____ of healthy foods.
7. Offering all new foods at a meal is a good way to get a child to try something new.
True or False?
8. Encourage your child to invent and help prepare new _____.
9. Naming a food for a child can get them excited about eating it.
True or False?
10. It is better to say “Stop crying and I will give you a cookie” than “I’m sorry you are sad. Come here and let me give you a big hug.”
True or False?

July Quiz Answers. 1. Stroke 2. Nutritious 3. True 4. TV Watching 5.False
6. Less 7. False 8. Body Image 9. One Year 10. Nutrient-Dense



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