

What to do with Picky Eaters

Mealtimes for many families are a time to share and connect. For many cultures it is considered a sacred event. However, if you have one or more picky eaters to feed, it can be an unpleasant event and often stressful.

Whether you are a child or an adult we all have food preferences. We all have foods we like and foods that we don't like. According to Taylor, Wernimont, Northstone and Emmett (2015), there is not an official definition for a picky eater. It is often characterized by a strong preference for certain foods and an unwillingness to try new foods. According to National Eating Disorders Association, it is less common, but those who do not like entire food groups or fear eating certain foods can be referred to as "selective eaters."

A goal in feeding children is to try to create a more positive experience around food and meals with your family. Try to remain patient and never force a child to eat something.

Here are some tips that come from Better Kid Care Program that can help a child broaden their food preferences.

1. **Go slow and introduce only one new food at a time.** While making sure that there is food that the child likes and is comfortable with at the meal.
2. **Make it small.** A child's stomach is small, so "a taste" can be small too. Let your child decide what amount of new food they are willing to taste, even if it half a teaspoon. Celebrate for what they tasted.
3. **It may end back on the plate.** A skill you can teach children is how to spit food back into a napkin. This allows the child to have control over whether they would like to swallow the new food. If the child knows they have this option, they may be more willing to try new food.
4. **Keep trying.** Don't give up on a food if your child refuses it the first few times. It could take up to 10 to 15 times of exposing your child to a food before they will accept it. Also preparing the food a different way may encourage them to like it.
5. **Be a role model.** Children learn by watching adults. This is true when trying new foods. It is helpful for children to see your willingness to try new foods. As a family, select a food that no one has tasted before, therefore this can be a shared experience.
6. **Make it fun.** Make a meal that has different colors and have the kids sort the foods by color.
7. **Meal plan, shop and cook together.** Involve children in planning, shopping, and cooking. Even small children can be involved in the planning and preparing.
8. **Don't use short-order cooking or bribes.** It can be frustrating and counterproductive to cook separate meals as it encourages picky eating. Keep family meals all the same.

Remember to include a variety of foods that you know your kids will eat or try. Try offer snacks no less that two hours before or after meals. Remember, a truly hungry child will eat.

9. **Be positive and patient.** Children eat several times a day, that gives you several opportunities to try new food. Be patient with feeding times and try to stay calm and positive.

Source: Picky Eaters (Better Kid Care), Penn State Extension.