

Tips for Picky Eaters

If you are a parent whose child is a picky eater, do not worry, you are not alone! A picky toddler is a normal toddler. After their first year of exponential growth, toddlers gain weight, grow more slowly, and do not require as much energy. In addition to needing less food, toddlers are always on the move and most times it is a challenge to get them to sit still for an entire meal. These changes in eating patterns are two of the main reasons that children will just pick at some of the foods on their plates. One of the best things you can do is to rid yourself of the notion of the “Clean Plate Club”. Instead of insisting on “finish your vegetables before you go play”, prepare nutritious foods, offer a variety of healthy options, and relinquish control of the ‘when’ and ‘how much’ to your child. More helpful tips for mealtimes with a picky eater:

- **Lower expectations** – Your child may eat well one day and then eat minimal the next day. A parent should expect some ups and downs. Aim for a balanced week, not a balanced day. A typical calorie range for a toddler is 1,000-1,300 calories per day.
- **Keep the schedule fluid** – While you might want to keep yourself on a strict meal schedule it might not be realistic for a toddler. Snacking throughout the day can minimize spikes in blood sugar that can have a negative impact on a child’s behavior.
- **Water is best** – Try to limit the amount of juice and milk between meals as these can cause your child to fill up and have a decreased appetite at snack and mealtimes. Encourage drinking water between meals.
- **Enough is enough** – Encourage your child to pay attention to the physical signs of satiety. Allow your child to communicate when they are full and don’t insist that they finish. Don’t force overeating (even if you do not think they have eaten enough).
- **Finger foods are favorites** – If your child isn’t particularly skilled with utensils yet, try finger foods so they can feed themselves. Offer small, cut up, and bite-sized pieces.
- **Re-introduce foods** – One day your child might refuse or reject a particular food item and then the next time you offer it, there may be no protests. Unfortunately, the opposite of this is true; one day they may reject a previous favorite. If your child refuses a food after a few attempts, make it a point to say that it is okay and that they can try it another time (consider preparing the food a different way).
- **Offer options** – Instead of 2 or 3 main items for a meal, consider offering smaller amounts of 4-6 items. This prevents overwhelming your child with a large amount of one food and offers a great deal of choice and variety.
- **Super smoothies** – Homemade or pre-packaged fruit and vegetable smoothies are an excellent way to balance meals. Puréed fruits and vegetables have the same nutritional value as raw pieces. If that is the preferred method of getting them down, that is okay!

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- **Keep it creative** - Use different shaped cookie cutters to make fun sandwiches, pancakes, waffles and pizza. You and your child can also come up with nicknames for foods that will sound appealing to your child. Let them get involved with naming their favorites! (for ex: broccoli trees, banana wheels, apple moons etc.).
- **Pay attention to presentation** – Using colorful dishware with separate food compartments, colorful utensils AND using a variety of colorful foods will make meal times more fun and festive.
- **Play date picnic** – Just as adults tend to be social eaters, so are children. Invite a friend over for lunch and allow them to share and experiment with foods together.
- **Experiment with dips and spreads** – Even though it can be extra messy, dipping fruits, vegetables and crackers into dips can be extra fun for your child and a great way for them to try new foods (for ex: cottage cheese, cream cheese, yogurt, jams, peanut butter and guacamole).
- **Vegetables in small doses** – Children under 5 years old should have between 3-5 vegetables per day. That might seem like a lot, but they are not the same serving size as adults eat! Each serving is only a tablespoon for each year of age (for ex: a 3-year old's serving size is 3 tablespoons of vegetables per day).
- **Family farming** – Plant a garden and assign jobs to your child so that they can participate and be proud of the harvest! They will get excited and be more willing to eat the vegetables that they grew themselves.
- **Role model** – Your child will pay attention to what you do. If you are not a fan of fruit and vegetables, then this is a great time for you to re-introduce them to yourself. If there is something that you don't like, don't let your child see a negative reaction because they will most likely provide the same reaction as you.
- **Chef's assistant** – Enlist your child's help, whether it be in the grocery store, the kitchen or both! Allow them to help with simple tasks such as washing foods, mixing and stirring.
- **Focus on food** – Eliminate distractions by shutting off the TV and keeping toys away from the table. Engage your child while eating by asking them to describe the smell, texture, and taste of the food.
- **Try to relax and be patient** – Keep re-introducing foods, try new recipes and preparation methods and stay positive, don't take the pickiness personally!