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Strategies to reduce picky eating

Picky eating is common in young children. It usually improves as the child grows older, and it is not usually cause for concern with regard to the child's growth, health, or development. The following approaches may help decrease the behavior.

Perform a "functional analysis"

That impressive-sounding term just means you should begin by asking the question, "What is it about my child's preferred foods that he or she likes?"

If your child likes a food at a particular temperature, texture, or flavor, try adding foods with similar qualities to the diet. For example, if your child won't eat carrots but enjoys juices, try carrot juice (or apple-carrot juice). If your child likes mashed potatoes but not corn, try creamed corn.

Provide a pleasant mealtime atmosphere

Studies show that people think food tastes better when it is eaten in a pleasant and social setting. Because some children become easily wound up, they are better able to focus on eating when mealtimes are calm. A calm setting can increase the child's willingness to try new foods; the more arousing, stressful, or exciting the atmosphere, the less cooperative the child will be. Other children; however, eat better in a more stimulating atmosphere (with music playing, for example). Watch your child to see what seems to work best, and follow your gut feeling.

Expose the child to good role models who eat a wide variety of foods

Your example as the parent is helpful, but friends and classmates are more powerful examples. If your child has the opportunity to eat meals with other children, (such as in preschool), that may be an opportunity to expand his or her menu of foods. Older brothers and sisters can also be great models. Studies show that if a child is seated at the table with other children who like a particular vegetable, the child will learn to like that vegetable more over time. Just don't criticize your child in front of peers or siblings, or use other children as examples. This practice can backfire if it makes the child feel bad or feel pressured to eat a food.

Give lots of encouragement

Praising your child for trying a new food may encourage him (or her) to try other new foods. Studies indicate that praise also increases the chances that a child will grow to like the food he was praised for eating.

Do not give food rewards for eating, however. When a child is given dessert, for example, as a reward for eating a food such as a vegetable, the child learns to like the food he was rewarded for eating less over time. Also, never punish your child for refusing to try a new food.

Offer a new food repeatedly

Research shows that the more familiar a food is, the more children (and adults) like it. Don't despair if your child continues to refuse peas after you offer them three or four times. A new food has to be introduced 10 times, on average, before most children accept it. Choose a mild but tasty vegetable that you think your child will probably learn to like, and serve it at meals repeatedly.

Enforce the "try one bite" rule with care

The "try one bite" rule has been shown to increase children's willingness to try new foods. If, however, your child has a difficult temperament, and requiring her to try a bite disrupts mealtime or upsets her (or you), stop this approach! With a child who has an intense or stubborn temperament, some battles are worth fighting (ones that involve safety, for example) - but getting her to try a bite of green beans is probably not one of them. If you are concerned about your child's weight gain or intake of healthy food, talk to your pediatrician - repeated battles to force a resistant child into eating rarely work.

Provide information about the food

An older child may be more willing to try a new food if you tell him about the food's flavor. For example, if your 5 year old scowls at the green bean casserole served at Thanksgiving dinner, it may help to explain to him that the casserole is made of green beans, which he likes, and the mushroom soup that is one of his favorite foods, and that it tastes a little salty but mild. This approach may not work as well with younger children, who often don't yet grasp the meaning of "flavor words" (sweet, salty, sour) or who have not yet developed a vocabulary for "food words".

Combine new foods with familiar ones

Offering an unfamiliar food, such as a meat, in combination with a preferred food, such as ketchup, increases the likelihood that your child will try the new food. If dipping carrot sticks in soup makes your child more willing to eat the carrots, let her do it instead of forbidding it because it is "bad manners."

Offer a variety of foods at the same snack or meal

Children (and adults) eat more when a wider variety of foods, with a combination of flavors, is provided. For example, instead of offering only crackers as a snack, try offering crackers, cheese, and apple slices.

Most important, give it time

Young children are well known to be picky eaters, but most of them grow out of it, eventually. All of the methods in the world may not be as helpful as patience and time. While you're

waiting, make life easier for yourself and your child. If your child prefers two flavors of soups, stockpile them. Try freezing child-size portions of his favorite foods and popping one in the microwave before the big family dinner to avoid having an upset child disrupt the meal.

If your child remains a picky eater into the older school years, it may be time to simply accept it as part of the child's personality. Take a moment and reflect on who else in the family is a picky eater - a favorite grandmother or uncle, perhaps, or even you! Sometimes, this helps put your child's behavior into proper perspective.