

- **Avoid a lot of drinks other than water.** Does your child drink so much milk or juice during the day that they're not hungry at mealtimes? Most fruit juices are glorified cool aid and because of processing add little nutritive value. Offer water or cut juice down with $\frac{3}{4}$ part water.
- **Don't keep many sweets or refined carbohydrates (chips, pretzels, crackers etc) in the house.** If they're not around, your child won't be tempted by them (and neither will you). These can be "special occasion" foods reserved only for parties or family outings.
- **Add one new food every two weeks.** In order to decide on this food, make it something that is similar in taste, texture, or color to what they already eat. For example, if your child loves french fries, have them try sweet potato fries. Make sure it is a healthy food and not an empty-calorie one. Have your child try one bite of the new food every day for two weeks. Introduce only one food at a time.
- **Provide incentives.** Announce to your child that when they finish their one bite, they can do a favorite activity like coloring, TV, or playing outside. Never bribe with dessert.
- **Offer a variety.** Don't offer your children the same foods every day. Just like adults, children are creatures of habit and will gravitate towards "familiar" foods that get them stuck in a rut. For example, if your child prefers to eat the same cereal every morning, allow them to eat that cereal 3 mornings a week and rotate with eggs etc.

Some children get over picky eating later on in childhood, but we know as parents, pickiness is not a problem to ignore. Don't become stressed by pickiness, but instead take control by knowledge and strategies that will help your child become healthier and enjoy a good relationship with food. Your pediatrician and nutritionist are there for you if you need support toward your child's competent and healthy eating.



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Picky Eating & the Smart Parent

By: Lindy Ford, RD, LDN

It's dinner time. Parental tension rises. "Are we going to have our nightly battle with Jeffrey and food again? Maybe this time he will eat something other than chicken nuggets and macaroni." Jeffrey demands his "usual" and the battle is on. Mom cajoles and bribes him to eat something else to no avail. She feels obligated to make him something different than the rest of family. After all, he has to eat something. He can't go to bed hungry.



Food issues with kids are tough—no doubt about it. Let's set the record straight. If you have a picky eater, you are not a bad parent. We know innately, though, that picky eating can undermine good health and isn't best for our kids.

We certainly don't want to digress to the days of making children sit for hours in front of plate of Brussels sprouts or demand that they "clean their plates" because of starving orphans in Outer Mongolian. On the other hand, we don't want to deprive our children of life-giving, brain enhancing phytonutrients, and create social problems and a bad relationship with food either. All parents want balance in this area.

Picky eaters are not all created equal. The roots may be physical, medical, emotional, or behavioral. Be a parental food detective and try to figure out what is the underlying cause of the problem. Work with your pediatrician or medical professional if you need help. Beyond this, there are positive strategies all parents can incorporate to help their child become a competent eater.

Why is it so important for my child to enjoy a variety of healthy foods?

Children miss out on important nutrients when their food choices are limited. A child who restricts themselves to eating an empty-calorie, low-nutrient diet (goldfish, pasta, bread, cereal, sweets, french fries, yogurt—the "white" diet) will not enjoy optimal development and health.

According to 2009 statistical data, fewer than 10% of children ages 4 – 13 meet the government requirements for consumption of fruits and vegetables. These requirements are not there to make our lives more difficult, but to protect and enhance the health of our children.

Children who mainly eat the “white diet” are more susceptible to viral and bacterial illnesses, lack of energy or hyperactivity, moodiness, stomach issues, irritability, poor sleep, and failure to meet their cognitive and physical potential. The good news—we as parents can change these scenarios.

What are the first steps I should take when dealing with a picky eater?

- **Rule out an underlying medical problem.** Picky eating can also be a sign of underlying medical issues. Work with your pediatrician or health care provider to rule out dental problems, throat pain, reflux, colon impaction or other medical issues.

- **Consider what kids need and not just what they want.** Children don't necessarily know instinctively what's good for them. When my older kids were little, they could grow sweaters on their teeth before they felt compelled to brush them. My three year old would love to run merrily into a busy street. Most children (especially young children 8 and below) cannot be left to decide the composition of their diets.

In “Secrets Feeding a Healthy Family,” Ellyn Satter, MS, RD, states, “To have a positive feeding relationship, maintain a division of responsibility. You do the what, when and where of feeding, and your child does the how much and whether of eating.”

- **Know that some children are genetically more susceptible than others to avoid new foods and become picky.** About 10% of children are “hypertasters.” These children are highly sensitive to the texture, taste and smell of food. Nevertheless, the hypertasters can still become less picky.

- **Take control.** Some experts say that most picky eaters are made not born (the “hypertasters” are the latter). Why? Parents care more that the child eats than what they eat.

Kelly Dorfman, MS, LND, pediatric nutritionist states, “Most parents don't allow their children to pick their bedtime, whether they feel like going to school or not, or anything they want to watch on TV, so why would parents not pick the food the child eats? We are raising a generation of food prima donnas by allowing children to have all the say in what they will eat.”



- **Realize you won't create an eating disorder by dealing with pickiness.**

Kelly Dorfman also states, “Talking about food and telling children they need to eat healthy food does not cause eating disorders any more than educating children about drugs causes addiction.” She is not suggesting an endless food fight, but instead for parents to develop a plan to help their kids overcome pickiness and enjoy greater health and wellness.

- **Start with your own eating habits.** No parent is a perfect eater, but we can all improve. Do you enjoy eating and have a good relationship with food? Are you adverse to try new foods? Our children pick up their eating cues from us—even if you don't like a healthy food, don't verbalize this to your child. Try to eat a variety of foods and your kid will be more inclined to do so.

Realize that nutrition is a powerful ally to parents—we feel better, get sick less often, enjoy better moods, think clearer, possess more energy and the list goes on and on. Keep this thought firmly entrenched in your mind as you soldier on to overcome pickiness (maybe in yourself as well).

What are some practical ways I can help my child overcome pickiness?

- **Provide regular, consistent meals and snacks—every 2 - 3 hours is best.** Grazing is out. Kids like consistency and providing it through meals and snacks is one way to overcome pickiness.

- **Schedule regular family meals.** This not only creates a positive relationship with food, but positive emotional and social benefits for our children as well. Try to keep family meals pleasant and enjoyable.

- **Never become a short-order cook.** Resist the temptation to prepare special meals just for your picky eater. Offer the same foods to the whole family, but try to make at least one thing that you know your child likes.

- **Don't negotiate.** Bargaining over food sets you up for a power struggle. Put the food in front of your child, and leave it up to them whether they eat it or not. Don't allow them to eat again until it is a scheduled meal or snack time.

- **Give choices.** When children help pick out vegetables, they often become more acceptable. Allow older kids to cut up and cook healthy foods. If green veggies are an aversion, try orange or red ones instead. You can also offer them raw with a dip like ranch dressing or hummus. Have them choose between two foods to try so they have some control over eating.

