

Strategies for Picky Eaters and Mealtime Guidelines for Children

Parent Information

- Schedule regular meals and low-calorie snacks.
- Buy a variety of foods that you want the child to eat. Be adventurous with food! Let your child make their own food choices from the healthful choices you provide.
- Limit meals to 30 minutes (“kitchen is open”) and 10-15 minutes for snacks. A child’s attention span is short for everything, including meals. (One idea is to set a timer to help take the pressure off parents and prevent nonproductive discussions.)
- Best not to offer liquids between meals except plain water (“kitchen is closed”).
- Family sits together at mealtime.
- Make a routine for eating and follow it as many days as you can. Same room, table and utensils for each meal.
- Eliminate distractions: turn off all electronic devices! Mealtime in front of a screen prevents family interaction and interferes with the child’s eating and is a distraction.
- Neutral environment without comments about food intake.
- Serve new foods when your child is a little hungry.
- Allow younger children to explore foods by touching, smelling and tasting. Children often explore new foods by looking, smelling, licking, chewing the food and sometimes even spitting it out. One day your child will finally decide the food is ok and swallow it. These actions are signs that your child is interested in new foods. Discouraging him/her may make your child less willing to try new things.
- For children, negative attention is better than no attention. Try to notice and praise positive behavior and ignore the frustrating behaviors.
- Allow older children to participate in food purchase and meal preparation.
- Never use food as a reward, bribe or incentive. Food should be used a nourishment, not as a reward or punishment. In the long run, food bribery usually creates more problems than it solves.

Note: Reward your child’s “away from mealtime” behavior with non-food items such as a sticker chart, trip to the park or a treasure hunt with clues around the house. Try to get in the habit of “catching” your child behaving well around the house or at school and offering praise.

- When a child whines or complains about the food being served, ask child to eat other foods offered at the meal. If the child cannot behave properly, have the child go to his or her room or sit quietly away from the table until the meal is finished. Don’t let him or her take food along, return for dessert or eat until the next planned meal or snack time.
- Praise child for showing interest in food.
- Most children go through “picky” phases. This is normal. Continue to offer healthy food and let them learn to like new foods. Giving attention to the finicky eating habits only reinforces a child’s demands to limit foods. Continue to offer a variety of food groups.
- Allow at least 20 exposures to new foods for acceptance by child.
- Offer unfamiliar foods first and pair with familiar or preferred foods.
- Food jags are common when your child will want to eat the same food over and over at every meal. Allow your child to eat what he or she wants if the food is wholesome. Offer other foods at each meal. After a few days, the child will likely try other foods. Food jags rarely last long enough to cause harm.

- Encourage self-feeding (finger feeding and holding spoon)
- Avoid excessive coaxing, threatening or forced feeding.
- Remove food without comment if child loses interest.
- Serve small portions at the table for everyone from the same container.
- Offer liquids only after child begins eating solids.
- Offer plain, unflavored water as primary beverage.
- Serve milk only at meals and limit daily intake of low-fat or fat-free milk to:
 - 2 cups for ages 2-3 years.
 - 2 ½ cups for ages 4 to 8 years.
 - 3 cups for 9 years and older.

Note: Whole milk is needed for children less than 2 years old (for brain development) but limit milk intake to less than 16-20 oz per day. Toddlers often fill up on milk and then will not feel hungry for solids.

- Limit fruit juice to 4 oz per day (one juice box).
- Discourage sweetened beverages (soft drinks, juice drinks, sports or energy drinks).
- Be supportive, set limits and do not be afraid to let your child go hungry if he or she will not eat what is served. Don't worry if your child skips a meal.

Well-meaning adults often view a child's odd food and eating behaviors as a problem. However, childhood food jags, a fear of new foods and other feeding challenges are usually part of normal development.

Children often use the table as a stage for showing their independence. Eating is just one more way children learn about the world.

There is no need to worry if a child skips a meal or won't eat the vegetables on his or her plate. Keep the big picture in mind. Offer a variety of healthful, tasty and nourishing foods. Over time, your child will get everything needed to grow and develop normally. Plenty of food variety and a relaxed, happy atmosphere at mealtime are the most important.