



Why Are Kids Picky Eaters?

Babies will put almost anything in their mouths to sample. It's an important way they explore the world. The flavors and textures they taste an average of 6 to 10 times¹ are likely to remain favorites even a year later, when the picky eating stage has begun.²

But soon after they learn how to walk, toddlers start to become much pickier about what goes in their mouths. This makes sense: You wouldn't want children to toddle away from parents and pick a berry and eat it. It might make them sick. You wouldn't want them to pick a green leaf and swallow it. It might be poisonous. Children are designed not to trust and not to like new fruits and vegetables. We call this protective mechanism "neophobia."³ Children who refuse to eat certain foods can have a physical fear response to new foods.

But the result can make parents want to pull their hair out! Many kids accept only a limited variety of foods. Picky eaters may demand food prepared in specific ways and may throw tantrums when denied foods. Parents worry that their children aren't getting enough to eat. Or enough protein. Or enough veggies.

At any given age between 2 and 11, from 13% to 22% of kids are described as picky eaters. But learning to like a broader variety of foods is an issue for many more families.⁴

What's a Parent to Do With a Picky Eater?

Many children carry within them an unwritten rule: The foods I already enjoy are good but new foods are suspect and likely to taste bad. My favorite strategies for expanding variety are listed below and involve convincing picky eaters either that a food isn't really new, or that unlike other new foods, this one tastes good. Often this is a gradual process.

1. **Repetition.** Repeated exposures can still work at this stage — but it may now take 89 tries before a child learns to like something.⁵ Asking kids to finish their vegetables makes this less likely. But having them try a 'no thank you' bite, to see if they've learned to like it yet, can gradually make the food more trusted.
2. **Combination.** Combine familiar flavors with new foods. If they already like a particular pasta sauce, gradually adding new veggies can work well.
3. **Food prep.** The further upstream that kids are involved in food prep, the more easily they might learn to like the food.⁶ A child who helps you slice the veggies is more likely to enjoy them. It's more likely still if she picks them with you from a garden (or a farmer's market), and even more likely if she helps you plant them, water them, and watches them grow. Bottom line? Put on some music and have a great time in the kitchen teaching nutrition to your children. Take kids' cooking classes. Grow some basil together on your windowsill, or some tomatoes or carrots in a container on the patio.

4. **Characters.** Breakfast cereal and fast food companies understand that cartoon characters make children more likely to choose and enjoy a food. It also works for veggies. Just putting an Elmo sticker on some broccoli made children more than twice as likely to choose broccoli over a candy bar.⁷
5. **Peers.** When picky eaters see other kids enjoying food, it signals that the food is safe and tastes good.⁸ Older kids are stronger influences than peers.⁹ Be on the lookout for older kids, even just a bit older, who could be good role models — in your extended family, in your neighborhood, or on various teams. Create opportunities for your child to see them eating. Even one meal can make a difference for children who refuse to eat certain foods.
6. **Families.** Eating together, family style, increases the odds that your child will start liking foods you eat whether or not you try anything else. Even seven meals together a week can make a big difference.¹⁰ If dinners don't work, try breakfast or weekend meals.

Create a Healthy Diet for Picky Eaters by Covering the Bases

Healthy kids tend to get plenty of calories, on average, even if they are identified as picky eaters. They also tend to get plenty of fat and plenty of carbs.¹¹ You don't need to feed them junk just so they'll eat.

A multivitamin with minerals can help fill in the gaps while they are learning to like new foods, but it probably won't contain much in the way of protein, calcium, or omega-3 fats.

The RDA for protein from age 4 to 8 is 19 grams per day. Just two glasses of organic milk provides almost all of that (with about one gram per ounce). This also provides calcium, vitamin D and vitamin A — and milk with DHA gives omega-3 fats as well.

Bon appetit!

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