

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PICKY EATERS

---

It is easy, with some children, to begin to dread dinnertime. We prepare all kinds of sensible meals composed of what we think are healthy, appealing foods. Most of these offerings end up splattered on the high-chair tray and carpeting the floor. To make matters worse, we take our kids' rejection of our cuisine personally, sure that this is a sign of parental lapse on our part. What is wrong? Why were these kids such picky eaters?

**WHY TODDLERS ARE PICKY.** Being a picky eater is part of what it means to be a toddler. We have since learned that there are developmental reasons why kids between one and three years of age peck and poke at their food. After a year of rapid growth (the average one-year-old has tripled her birth weight), toddlers gain weight more slowly. So, of course, they need less food. The fact that these little ones are always on the go also affects their eating patterns. They don't sit still for anything, even food. Snacking their way through the day is more compatible with these busy explorers' lifestyle than sitting down to a full-fledged feast.

**LEARNING THIS HELPS US RELAX.** We now realize that our job is simply to buy the right food, prepare it nutritiously (steamed rather than boiled, baked rather than fried), and serve it creatively. We leave the rest up to the kids. How much they eat, when they eat, and if they eat, is mostly their responsibility; we've learned to take neither the credit nor the blame.

**TODDLERS LIKE TO BINGE ON ONE FOOD AT A TIME.** They may eat only fruits one day and vegetables the next. Since erratic eating habits are as normal as toddler mood swings, expect your child to eat well one day and eat practically nothing the next. Toddlers from one to three years need between 1,000 and 1,300 calories a day, yet they may not eat this amount every day. Aim for a nutritionally-balanced week, not a balanced day, remembering the just noticeable difference to avoid food jags which may eliminate a food.

All this is not to say that parents shouldn't encourage their toddlers to eat well and develop healthy food habits. Some suggestions to try:

**1. Offer a nibble tray.** Toddlers like to graze their way through a variety of foods, so why not offer them a customized smorgasbord? The first tip is to offer toddlers a nibble tray. Use an ice-cube tray, a muffin tin or a compartmentalized dish, and put bite-size portions of colorful and nutritious foods in each section. Call these finger foods playful names that a two-year-old can appreciate, such as:

- Apple moons (thinly sliced)
- Avocado boats (a quarter of an avocado)
- Banana wheels
- Broccoli trees (steamed broccoli florets)
- Carrot swords (cooked and thinly sliced)

- Cheese building blocks
- Egg canoes (hard-boiled egg wedges)
- Little Os (O-shaped cereal)

**NUTRITIP:** 5-6 meals per day – Good Behavior

A child's demeanor often parallels her eating patterns. Parents often notice that a toddler's behavior deteriorates toward the end of the morning or mid-afternoon. Notice the connection? Behavior is at its worst the longer they go without food. Regular mini-meals minimizes blood-sugar swings and lessens the resulting undesirable behavior.

**2. Dip it.** Young children think that immersing foods in a tasty dip is pure fun (and delightfully messy). Some possibilities to dip into:

- Cottage cheese or tofu dip
- Cream cheese
- Fruit juice-sweetened preserves
- Guacamole
- Peanut butter, thinly spread
- Pureed fruits or vegetables
- Yogurt, plain or sweetened with juice concentrate

Those dips serve equally well as spreads on apple or pear slices, bell-pepper strips, rice cakes, bagels, toast, or other nutritious platforms.

**3. Spread it.** Toddlers like spreading, or more accurately, smearing. Show them how to use a table knife to spread cheese, peanut butter and fruit concentrate onto crackers, toast or rice cakes.

**4. Top it.** Toddlers are into toppings. Putting nutritious, familiar favorites on top of new and less-desirable foods is a way to broaden the finicky toddler's menu. Favorite toppings are yogurt, cream cheese, melted cheese, guacamole, tomato sauce, applesauce and peanut butter.

**5. Drink it.** If your youngster would rather drink than eat, don't despair. Make a smoothie – together. Milk and fruit – along with supplements such as juice, egg powder, wheat germ, yogurt, honey and peanut butter – can be the basis of very healthy meals. So what if they are consumed through a straw? One note of caution: Avoid any drinks with raw eggs or you'll risk salmonella poisoning.

**6. Cut it up.** How much a child will eat often depends on how you cut it. Cut sandwiches, pancakes, waffles and pizza into various shapes using cookie cutters.

**7. Package it.** Appearance is important. For something new and different, why not use your child's own toy plates for dishing out a snack? Our kids enjoy the unexpected and fanciful when it comes to serving dishes – anything from plastic measuring cups to ice-cream cones.

You can also try the scaled-down approach. Either serve pint-size portions or, when they're available, buy munchkin-size foodstuffs, such as mini bagels, mini quiches, chicken drumettes (the meat part of the wing) and tiny muffins.

**8. Become a veggie vendor.** We have heard, "He won't eat his vegetables" a thousand times. Yet, the child keeps right on growing. Vegetables require some creative marketing, as they seem to be the most contested food in households with young children. How many vegetables do toddlers need? Although kids should be offered three to five servings of veggies a day, for children under five, each serving need be only a tablespoon for each year of age. In other words, a two-year-old should ideally consume two tablespoons of vegetables three to five times a day. So if you aren't the proud parent of a veggie lover, try the following tricks:

- Plant a garden with your child. Let her help care for the plants, harvest the ripe vegetables, and wash and prepare them. He will probably be much more interested in eating what he has helped to grow.
- Slip grated or diced vegetables into favorite foods. Try adding them to rice, cottage cheese, cream cheese, guacamole or even macaroni and cheese. Zucchini pancakes are a big hit as are carrot muffins.
- Top vegetables with a favorite sauce.
- Use vegetables as finger foods and dip them in a favorite sauce or dip.
- Using a small cookie cutter, cut the vegetables into interesting shapes (works for sandwiches, pancakes, lunch meat, deli-sliced cheeses, too).
- Steam your greens. They are much more flavorful and usually sweeter than when raw.
- Make veggie art. Create colorful faces with olive-slice eyes, tomato ears, mushroom noses, bell pepper mustaches and any other playful features you can think of. Some kids love to put olives on the tip of each finger -- "Olive fingers" -- then nibble this nutritious and nutrient-dense food off the fingertips. Zucchini pancakes make a terrific face to which you can add pea eyes, a carrot nose and cheese hair.
- Concoct creative inventions. There are all kinds of possible variations on the old standby "cheese in the trees" (cheese melted on steamed broccoli florets). Or, you can all enjoy the pleasure of veggies topped with peanut butter sauce, a specialty of Asian cuisines.

**9. Share it.** If your child is going through a picky-eater stage, invite over a friend who is the same age or slightly older whom you know "likes to eat." Your child will catch on. Group feeding lets the other kids set the example.

**10. Respect tiny tummies.** Keep food servings small. Wondering how much to offer? Here's a rule of thumb – or, rather, of hand. A young child's stomach is approximately the size of his fist. So dole out small portions at first and refill the plate when your child asks for more. This less-is-more meal plan is not only more successful with picky eaters; it also has the added benefit of stabilizing blood-sugar levels, which in turn minimizes mood swings. As most parents know, a hungry kid is generally not a happy kid.

**11. We all have appetites.** As much as you possibly can, let your child – and his or her appetite – set the pace for meals. But if you want your child to eat dinner at the same time you do, try to time his or her snack-meals so that they are at least two hours before dinner.

**12. Use sit-still strategies.** One reason why toddlers don't like to sit still at the family table is that their feet dangle. Try sitting on a stool while eating. You naturally begin to squirm and want to get up and move around. Children are likely to sit and eat longer at a child-size table and chair where their feet touch the ground or with firm support under their feet.

**13. Turn meals upside down.** The distinctions between breakfast, lunch and dinner have little meaning to a child. If your youngster insists on eating pizza in the morning or fruit and cereal in the evening, go with it – better than her not eating at all. This is not to say that you should become a short-order cook, filling lots of special requests, but why not let your toddler set the menu sometimes? Other family members will probably enjoy the novelty of waffles and hash browns for dinner.

**14. Have them help cook.** Children are more likely to eat their own creations, so, when appropriate, let your child help prepare the food. Use cookie cutters to create edible designs out of foods like cheese, bread, thin meat slices or cooked lasagna noodles. Give your assistant such jobs as tearing and washing lettuce, scrubbing potatoes or stirring batter. Put pancake batter in a squeeze bottle and let your child supervise as you squeeze the batter onto the hot griddle in fun shapes, such as hearts, numbers, letters or even spell the child's name.

**14. Make every calorie count.** Offer your child foods that pack lots of nutrition into small doses. This is particularly important for toddlers who are often as active as rabbits, but who seem to eat like mice.

Nutrient-dense foods that most children are willing to eat include:

- Avocados
- Pasta
- Broccoli
- Peanut butter
- Brown rice and other grains
- Potatoes
- Cheese
- Poultry
- Eggs
- Squash
- Fish
- Sweet potatoes
- Kidney beans
- Tofu
- Yogurt

**15. Count on inconsistency.** For young children, what and how much they are willing to eat may vary daily. This capriciousness is due in large part to their ambivalence about independence, and eating is an area where they can act out this confusion. So don't be surprised if your child eats a heaping plateful of food one day and practically nothing the next, adores broccoli on Tuesday and refuses it on Thursday,

wants to feed herself at one meal and be totally catered to at another. As a parent in our practice said, "The only thing consistent about toddler feeding is inconsistency." Try to simply roll with these mood swings and don't take them personally.

**16. Relax.** Sometime between his or her second and third birthday, you can expect your child to become set in his or her ideas on just about everything – including the way food is prepared. Expect food fixations. If the peanut butter must be on top of the jelly and you put the jelly on top of the peanut butter, be prepared for a protest. It's not easy to reason with an opinionated two-year-old. Better to learn to make the sandwich the child's way with the just noticeable difference. Don't interpret this as being stubborn. Toddlers have a mindset about the order of things in their world. Any alternative is unacceptable. This is a passing stage.

(For more information see: <http://www.askdrsears.com/topics/family-nutrition/abcs-teaching-nutrition-your-kids>)

## MINI-MEALS

We have noticed that children's behavior often deteriorates in the late morning and late afternoon, or three to four hours after a meal. Children simply run out of fuel. When blood-sugar levels go down, stress hormones kick in to raise it up again, but this can cause behavioral problems and diminished concentration. To smooth out the blood-sugar mood swings, try the fine art of MINI-MEALS. Let your child nibble on nutritious foods throughout the day. Make them easily accessible in a lunch pack at school. (Smart teachers allow even upper-grade children to have a mid-morning snack.) Carry snacks with you when you are away from home. While at home, keep a supply of healthy snacks readily available in the pantry or refrigerator.

**Prepare a nibble tray.** Use an ice cube tray, a muffin tin or a compartmentalized plastic dish and fill each section with bite-size portions of colorful and nutritious foods. Give the foods fun names, such as avocado boats (a quarter of an avocado sectioned lengthwise), banana or cooked carrot wheels, broccoli trees, cheese blocks, little Os (O-shaped cereal), canoe eggs (hard-boiled eggs cut lengthwise in wedges), moons (peeled apple slices, thinly spread with peanut butter), or shells and worms (different shapes of pasta). Shorten the spacing between feedings and you are less likely to have spacey children.

**Avoid distractions.** The food should be the focus of attention – no TV, no videos, no books, etc. Encourage conversation about the food using positive language and tones of voice.