

Tips to Handle Picky Eating



What do you do when a child won't eat a meal because something they don't like touched their plate? Or if they won't eat anything other than fruit or peanut butter sandwiches? These behaviors are common. Often, choosy eating is a sign that a child is growing up. What seems "choosy" may just be the first steps in learning to make decisions. Learning how to handle eating issues can help improve mealtimes.

Be relaxed with food jags

A food jag is when a child eats only one food for a period of time. This usually does not last long.

Look at what a child eats over a few days instead of one day or meal

Most children are eating more variety than you think.

Trust their appetite

Forcing a child to eat more than they want can be upsetting to the child and lead to overeating.

Set time limits for the start and end of a meal

Quietly remove the food when the time is up.

Serve food plain

Follow a request for "no foods touching" if that's important to a child. Usually children outgrow this need.

Don't make special meals for a choosy eater

Make and offer the same food for the whole family. Try to make at least one food that everyone will eat.

Offer healthy choices for your child to choose from

For example: Would you like broccoli or carrots as part of your dinner?

Provide only two or three choices

Let the child decide, but keep in mind they may choose nothing and that is okay.

Be patient, new foods take time.

It may take 10 or more tries for a child to accept a new food.

Be a good role model - try new foods yourself

Describe the taste, feel, and smell.

Talk to your child's health care provider when choosy eating is getting in the way of a child's physical or mental health.

Adults play a big role in the development of a child’s eating behaviors. What you say has an impact on developing healthy eating habits. Negative phrases can easily be changed into positive, helpful ones!

- Stay positive and avoid calling a child a “picky eater”. Children believe what we say!
- Focus on the child’s positive eating behavior, not on the food.

Phrases that HINDER	Phrases that HELP
<p>Instead of...</p> <p>Eat that for me. If you do not eat one more bite, I will be mad.</p> <p>Phrases like these teach a child to eat for your approval and love. This can lead the child to have unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about food and about themselves.</p>	<p>Try...</p> <p>This is kiwi fruit; it’s sweet like a strawberry. These radishes are very crunchy.</p> <p>Phrases like these help to point out the sensory qualities of food. They encourage a child to try new foods.</p>
<p>Instead of...</p> <p>You’re such a big girl; you finished all your peas. You have to take one more bite before you leave the table.</p> <p>Phrases like these teach a child to ignore fullness. It is better for them to stop eating when full or satisfied rather than when all of their food has been eaten.</p>	<p>Try...</p> <p>Is your stomach telling you that you’re full? Is your stomach still making its hungry growling noise?</p> <p>Phrases like these help a child to recognize when they are full. This can prevent overeating.</p>
<p>Instead of...</p> <p>See, that didn’t taste so bad, did it?</p> <p>Phrases like this implies to a child that they were wrong to refuse the food. This can lead to unhealthy attitudes about food or self.</p>	<p>Try...</p> <p>Do you like that? Which one is your favorite? Everybody likes different foods, don’t they?</p> <p>Phrases like these make a child feel like they are making the choices. It also shifts the focus toward the taste of food rather than who was right.</p>
<p>Instead of...</p> <p>No dessert until you eat your vegetables. Stop crying and I will give you a cookie.</p> <p>Offering foods, like dessert, in reward for finishing others, like vegetables, makes some foods seem better than others. Getting a food treat when upset teaches a child to eat to feel better. This can lead to overeating.</p>	<p>Try...</p> <p>We can try these vegetables again another time. Next time would you like to try them raw instead of cooked? I am sorry you are sad. Would you like a hug?</p> <p>Reward a child with attention and kind words. Comfort him or her with hugs and talks. Show love by spending time and having fun together.</p>

Adapted from “Nibbles for Health” Nutrition Newsletter for Parents of Young Children, USDA Food and Nutrition Service.