



Ideas for Picky Eaters

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Parents of picky eaters often find it challenging to motivate their children to eat healthy, balanced meals. Two important goals of ensuring healthy lifestyles for our children include teaching them about the importance of a balanced, nutritious diet, and modeling healthy meals at home. For parents of picky eaters, this can seem like an impossible task!

On top of dealing with a picky eater at mealtimes, parents can also encounter a child with a food *neophobia* (the fear of new foods), however this is typical for many toddlers and children. When it occurs, do not lose hope or patience – research has shown that continuing to introduce new or disliked foods in a positive way is key to helping kids overcome food neophobia.¹ The following are some helpful tips for feeding neophobic or picky eaters while teaching the importance of a balanced nutritious diet:

Tip #1 – Expose children to a variety of foods early and often.

Multiple exposures to a new food is essential – the more times children are exposed to a food, the more familiar it becomes, and the more likely they will be to try it and like it.² With guidance from your child's pediatrician, start by presenting vegetables and fruits to toddlers to help prevent the fear that can sometimes come with new foods later in childhood. It can take over 10-15 times for a child to attempt a new food, so be patient.

Also, consult with your pediatrician regarding appropriate foods at proper developmental stages for your child. Use caution with foods that are known choking hazards such as popcorn, nuts, seeds, hotdogs, grapes, peanut butter, carrots, celery, and meats.³

Tip #2 – Make it fun. Serve new foods with familiar dips to help get children excited about them.⁴ When the pediatrician thinks your child is ready, include yogurt or nut butter as a fruit dip. Children often love trying veggies with hummus, guacamole, or dressings to add flavor. You can also make sampling new foods fun by cutting them into shapes or making silly faces out of fruits and vegetables on the plate. When children realize that tasting new foods and flavors can be fun, they are more likely to keep up the habit.

Tip #3 – Add new foods to familiar favorites. Look for ways to add more fruits and vegetables to foods your family already loves, like: pizza, salads, and pastas.⁴ Make trail mixes out of your children’s favorite nuts and fruits, experiment with fruit smoothie concoctions, or try a new twist on an old favorite such as “ice cream” made with one ingredient—bananas! See directions below.

Banana “Ice Cream” Directions:

- Slice bananas with a knife—quarter-sized circles about a ¼ to ½ inch thick.
- Freeze overnight.
- Place in a blender or food processor and watch the bananas go from crumbly, gooey, lumpy, to finally creamy-smooth!
 - You may put in add-ins to your “ice cream” at the “creamy-smooth” phase.
- Transfer into an airtight container and freeze until firm.
- Enjoy!

Tip #4 – Involve the whole family. Make mealtime a family affair. Let your children see you eating the foods you would like them to eat as well.⁵ Pick a day of the week for the whole family to try something new together, like *New Food Friday*. Have fun making lists of new foods to experience together while creating a fun, family experience. As often as possible, ensure that the whole family is enjoying mealtimes together, thus making many opportunities for positive interactions. This will help foster a healthy eating environment.⁶

Tip #5 – Make the atmosphere positive. Children of all ages are often reluctant to try new foods. This may be frustrating for parents, but it is important to make sure the experience stays calm to prevent negative associations with new foods. When tensions rise, keep calm and eat on! Reassure children by reminding them how healthy foods will help their bodies grow. Fight the urge to force or bribe your child to eat a new food since this may have undesired consequences.⁷ Compromising for “just one bite” of a new food can be a helpful tactic, often encouraging children to taste a new food, or eat a vegetable they do not particularly like.

A child may choose not to eat at mealtimes as a way to get attention. If this is a consistent pattern, give the child some undivided attention before meals. Avoid giving the child negative attention when he or she refuses to eat; it can perpetuate a negative response in the future.

If reassurance and attempts are unsuccessful, keep up the efforts! Children’s taste preferences, and food likes and dislikes, are constantly changing. Consistency in exposing your child to new tastes is fundamental to helping him or her develop healthy habits for life.

Tip #6 – Teach children the benefits of healthy foods in their language. Foster excitement about eating healthy foods by helping children understand what healthy means. Explain in terms they understand. For example, statements like “Milk helps our bones grow strong!” and “Fruits and vegetables help our bodies fight germs that make us sick!” can be very effective when encouraging kids to try new, healthy foods.⁴

Reinforce health messages throughout the day. Simple comments while grocery shopping and preparing meals about the advantages of the fruits and vegetables being purchased and cooked can be powerful.⁸

Many foods marketed to children are high-fat, high-sugar, and are low in nutrients that should only be eaten once in a while.⁷ Have conversations with your children about the importance of balance, and that eating these “once in a while” foods should truly only be eaten *once in a while*. Too much of such foods can be unhealthy, contribute to poor eating habits, and may replace more nutritious foods that should be eaten daily.

Exposure to new food is key to alleviating potential fears about it. As mentioned earlier, do not worry when your child refuses to eat the food right away. Some children are much more likely to dive into new foods than others, and this is ok! Many take longer to be comfortable with new foods. Continuing to offer the food helps reduce the anxiety by making it more familiar.¹

When children have frustrations over new foods, explain that you care about them and their health. Your efforts will pay off. While encouragement may not always result in a love of all vegetables, fruits, or other healthy foods, it conveys the important message that you want them to be healthy and have healthy habits for a lifetime.

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