

Encouraging Picky Eaters to Try New Foods

Here are some strategies parents can use to diversify a narrow diet – no matter the child's age.

First, it's important to rule out any medical drivers or food allergies that could be causing a dislike of particular flavors or food groups. Children may avoid particular foods because they upset their stomachs. However, they may not be able to describe or identify this connection. Consult your pediatrician to investigate possible allergies or complicating medical conditions before starting any new food regime.

Also, it's perfectly natural for a child to be averse to eating a food that caused a bad tummy ache or a bout of food poisoning in the past. That's basic instinct!

Once you confirm that medical issues aren't behind a child's picky eating, you should keep one basic rule in mind: **Avoid making food a source of conflict in your family.**

It is very common for picky eating to lead to dinner table arguments and battles of will between children and parents or other caregivers. Arguing or trying to force a child to eat usually makes the situation worse. Instead, take a moment to think creatively and try to explore the possible causes behind your child's dislike of new or particular foods.

For example, many children dislike trying new things. In psychology, this is called neophobia. If a child seems afraid or wary of new foods, think of ways to manage this anxiety.

For example, instead of asking the child to taste a new food outright, try a stepwise approach. For example, first you can simply look at the food together. Then you can suggest the two or you smell it, or touch it. Then you can experiment with touching the food to your lips or licking it. Finally, you and your child might put the food in your mouth and chew it (and spit it out if necessary).

Sometimes, it helps to have a child mix the new food with a familiar and preferred food for the first taste. We've seen this gradual approach decrease anxiety about new foods by increasing familiarity.

It is also important to give children as many choices as possible so they can feel in control of their meals. For example, say you want your child to eat a vegetable at dinner. Instead of demanding that he eat peas, provide several choices, like cucumbers, peas and carrots. Similarly, you can present a wide array of food options at mealtime, and then invite your child to choose three foods to put on his plate. This approach also helps children know that it's okay to have preferences around food.

Along the same lines, if you're making your child's favorite macaroni and cheese for dinner, tell him that tonight he should add one mystery ingredient for other family

members to guess or discover during the meal. He gets to choose: turkey, broccoli or tomatoes? Encouraging choice and control within a defined window can help avoid arguments, tears and meltdowns at the dinner table. At the same time, it encourages a more varied and well-formed diet.

Some kids have sensory difficulties with food that go beyond flavor. For example, a child may dislike the way a cherry tomato turns from solid to squishy in her mouth, though she likes the flavor. It can be difficult for children to separate out that good taste from the disturbing texture. If this is one of your child's issues, explore creative solutions for managing the sensory concern. It may help the child to smash the tomatoes before eating it, or blend foods together to even out their textures.

Admittedly, the sources of food aversions can be difficult to identify. Certainly, a distressed 5-year-old can have a hard time understanding and describing what is bothering him about a particular food.

One pitfall I see many parents succumbing to is the reward system. Yes, the age-old "if you eat your broccoli, you can have ice cream." Though this trick may work as a quick fix, it won't produce the desired results in the long run. Your child may choke down the broccoli to get the reward, but this plan is not likely to increase his preference for eating broccoli. Instead, we want kids to enjoy new foods and form more flexible, healthy eating habits.

So, it's important to help your child find solutions. Most importantly, the more fun, the better! Bowl with watermelons. Make faces on pizzas with vegetables or pepperoni. Paint with pasta sauce. Experiment with how ingredients change color or consistency when mixed together. Each of these activities will help a child become more comfortable around new and different foods, create opportunities for trying new tastes and keep food discussions positive. Make mealtime an opportunity for flexibility, education, choices – and most of all- fun, and children will likely respond favorably, whatever their ages.