

Texas Children's Hospital

Caring for Your Child's Health

Picky eaters

Children may become "picky eaters" between the ages of 1-5. Do not give up. Strange or limited eating habits are often just a temporary phase. This is age-appropriate and normal, though it may seem strange. Toddlers eat or drink less because they are not growing as fast as when they were infants. At age 2, it is normal for children to gain only 4-6 pounds per year. Growing slower means less food is needed.

Ellyn Satter, a registered dietitian and child feeding expert, gives this advice: *Parents are responsible for what is presented to eat and the manner in which it is presented. Children are responsible for how much and even whether they eat.*

"My child doesn't eat very much or will say he isn't hungry at meal time."

Have the child sit at the table during mealtime even if he or she chooses not to eat. Do not extend mealtime or offer food until the next scheduled meal or snack time, even if the child states he or she is hungry. Limits must be set and consistently enforced. Don't make your child sit at the dinner table after the rest of the family is done eating. This will only cause him to develop unpleasant associations with mealtime.

Remember children are smart eaters. They only eat when hungry, and they stop when full. If your child skips a meal, he or she will most likely make up for it at the next meal or snack.

Kids have tiny tummies.

A typical serving is one tablespoon per year of age. A 2-year-old would probably eat 2 tablespoons of each food. Start the meal by providing a small amount of two to three foods. Seconds can be given if your child wants more.

Stop beverages (juice, milk, water, soda, tea, sports drinks, fruit drinks) an hour before meals or snacks. Liquids are filling, may decrease appetite and lower intake.

Offer solid foods at the beginning of the meal. Liquids are better at the end because they can be filling and may contain fewer nutrients than solid foods.

Make mealtime a calm and pleasant time. Limit distractions by turning off the television, computer or video games.

Use child size plates and utensils to keep your child from being overwhelmed by the amount of food. Allow your child to feed him or herself.

Children typically eat only two to three foods per meal rather than a little bit of everything. Your child will most likely balance out their diet over the course of a week.

Children do better with routines and can get cranky and might not eat well when off schedule. Meals and snacks should be about the same time each day. Allowing continued access to food (grazing all day) does not allow the child to become truly hungry and may affect appetite. Children need to eat often, not constantly.

When possible, set up meals at the same place each time. This can be a table or high chair. Your child should not be allowed to wander while eating.

Sit at the table and eat as a family. Seat your child in a high chair, booster seat or phone book to reach the table. Another option is to have child-size table and chairs.

Let your child help. Children enjoy washing, pouring and stirring foods. Setting the table can make a child feel helpful and more interested in the meal.

Be a good "food model" by eating many different healthy foods in front of your child. Children often copy the eating habits of those around them.

“My child eats the same thing at every meal.”

Don't worry if your child wants to eat the same food every day. This is normal.

Prepare foods the family eats. Have at least one food the child likes in case he doesn't eat much of the other foods. Do not prepare only his accepted foods.

Kids have more taste buds than adults, so be cautious about heavily seasoning foods.

Force-feeding or bribing is not recommended. This will only result in frustration and may actually cause the child to eat less.

Do not battle over food or make your child “clean the plate.”

Do not be impatient about your child's strong preferences for how food is served. A small child does not understand that a cheese sandwich cut in squares is the same as one cut in triangles.

“My child won't try new foods.”

Be creative! Add fun to meal and snack times when you can. Some ideas are:

- Use paper party plates to serve your child
- Host a Teddy Bear Tea Party and invite the bears to sit at the table
- Have a picnic outside when the weather is nice
- Make fun faces with the foods or cut them in special shapes using cookie cutters
- Give foods fun names like Popeye's Spinach, Bugs Bunny's Carrots

Think about how foods look. Children love food to have shape and color. Try arranging a new food creatively on the plate.

Talk about the foods – their temperature, color and texture. Hearing about foods over and over will help your child become more comfortable around them.

Give your child new foods at the start of the meal when he or she is most hungry. If he or she does not want it, thank him or her for trying it and continue with the meal.

Make a game of trying new foods and encourage your child to try at least one bite. Be careful not to force a new food, as this may cause the child to resent it.

Let your child simply taste food. Tasting but not swallowing new food is a way of learning about it, not a sign he or she is rejecting it.

Serve new foods with his or her favorite food. Only give a small portion or “just a taste.” He or she will be more likely to try it.

Do not give up on trying new foods, even if it has previously failed. It can take 10-20 times of trying a new food before your child will know if he or she likes it or not. Don't provide a separate meal for your picky eater.

Snack time tips

Planned snacks are essential to a toddler's diet.

Remember that you are in charge of what constitutes a snack and when it is given.

Offer one snack between meals, and one before bed. Serve snacks 1½ to 2 hours before the next meal. If snacks are too close to meals, a child's appetite can be poor.

Offer snacks before your child asks for them. If the child demands a snack out of hunger, he will be cranky and probably overindulge, and will be full at mealtime.

Serve snacks in the same place as meals (without TV, computer or video games).

Mealtime behaviors

Serve food at room temperature so your child can eat without having to wait for it to cool and risk burning themselves.

Listen to your child. They will tell you when they do not want to eat anymore. He will turn his face away, get distracted or just stop eating. Don't worry. Let your child do what his tummy is telling him or her. If you are concerned if your child is getting enough to eat, contact your doctor or dietitian.

If mealtime behavior becomes unacceptable and re-direction does not work, discontinue the meal and inform the child this behavior is unacceptable.

Eating is a social event and a child learns how to relate to others and what is expected of him or her in a social setting. If he or she sees others eating a certain food item, he or she may be more willing to try it.

Limit “junk” foods (chips, cookies, candy, soda). These provide empty calories and take up valuable space in the

