



For Release: January - March 2006

Working with Picky Eaters: the Toddler Years

Picky eating behavior is very common in young children, with the peak time during the toddler or preschool years. The struggles caused by “picky eaters” can be frustrating for both the parents and the child in question. To effectively handle picky eater confrontations, it is important to understand all of the pieces to this puzzle. The first step is identifying picky eater behavior.

- Throws or hides food
- Complains about or pushes food around on the plate
- Refuses or complains about certain foods (i.e., vegetables or meats)
- May develop “pickiness” from the start or develop it later on (i.e., could be a great eater initially and then become picky)

The next step is to understand why the picky eater behavior may be occurring. Children may be:

- Testing their power within the family
- Asserting their independence and autonomy
- Expressing their dislike of the color, texture or taste of certain foods (i.e., bitterness)
- Avoiding large pieces of food that may cause gagging
- Overwhelmed by new foods (especially toddlers); at this stage, they like repetition and familiarity which provides a sense of security
- Responding negatively to pressure (i.e., including at the dinner table)
- Enjoying the control they assume they have when begged to eat foods they dislike

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Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program staff at MSU Extension can answer questions or help you learn more about money management, parent, food, nutrition and health issues. MSU Extension educators integrate university and community resources to provide tools that help families succeed. For more information on FCS programs in Michigan, call your county MSU Extension office. Check the government pages of your phone book for contact information.

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Finally, once parents are able to identify picky eater behavior and have a better understanding of why it is occurring, it is important to respond to it productively.

- Choose your battles! Keep mealtimes positive.
- Serve small portions, as well as food that can be easily picked up.
- Substitute fruits for vegetables or vice versa.
- Provide several dishes to choose from at meal time, and allow children to select their own foods (provide at least one dish that everyone likes).
- Allow occasional substitutions (i.e., cereal or a sandwich).
- Respect strong food aversions, and allow a decline of a specific food, but do not allow complaining about the disliked food.
- Avoid discussing what a child eats in their presence and do not praise appropriate eating behavior. Do not use bribes or rewards for meeting your eating expectations; children should eat to satisfy their hunger and not to please adults.
- Set a good example; children watch adults' eating habits closely.
- Make faces with food (i.e., use fruit and veggies to create a face on a plate).
- Use cookie cutters to make fun shapes in the center of a sandwich, or use larger cutters to make the entire sandwich a fun shape!
- Involve children in the meal time preparation; they are more likely to eat if they are allowed to help (i.e., tear lettuce, snap green beans or assist with pouring or measuring).
- Let children "choreograph" their own meal (i.e., let them decide where food is placed on their plate).
- Conduct "taste-tests" at home and help children identify healthy foods.

In addition to the suggestions above, it is important for parents to alter their beliefs in some mealtime rules that were imposed on them as children. First and foremost, do not force a child to eat or stay at the table after a meal to "clean" their plate. This may cause unpleasant associations with meal time. When asking your child to try a new food, understand that tastes are acquired and that it may take at least ten times of viewing another person eating a specific food **before** the child is willing to try it, and it may take another ten times of **trying** the new food before they decide if they like it. So be patient—this process could take a few months. Lastly, allow a child to have **one** serving of dessert, even if they do not "clean" their plate (i.e.,

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dessert could be fruits, not just sweets), because food should not be a reward.

Ellen Satter, MS, RD, LCSW, BCD recommends that the parent is responsible for what, when and where a child eats, and the child is responsible for how much and whether they eat. Picky eater behavior in some instances can be the result of a health issue. It is recommended that you contact your physician if you notice your child losing weight, gagging or vomiting on certain foods, and if you have other questions or concerns.

For more information on these and other parenting, money management, food, nutrition or health issues, contact the MSU Extension office. MSU Extension Family and Consumer Science educators are located in all 83 Michigan counties to integrate university and community resources to help families succeed.

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