

Chava Adams

# Plating for the Picky Eater

Problem or power struggle?

**“Eat up, it’s good for you!”**

*Oh, the classic refrain of Jewish mothers across all cultures and generations, wielding chicken soup as a front-line defense against all maladies of the body and soul. It’s understandable that you feel uneasy when your little one starts turning up her nose at the healthy foods you’ve always offered.*

Picky eating commonly makes an appearance in the toddler years, when children are trying to increase their autonomy just as their growth — and appetite — begins to slow down. It is normal for children to go through phases in their eating habits, including a certain degree of fussiness.

Persistent and serious eating restrictions tend to involve elements of anxiety and habit. Therefore, when children start getting picky, it’s important for parents to stay calm. Overreacting or getting into power struggles could cause the challenge to escalate, while catering to the child’s whims could reinforce finicky habits.

Rena Reiser, intuitive eating coach at Mind Over Munchies, advocates a “division of responsibility” approach, in which parents are responsible for providing a reasonable variety of food in a set time and place, while the children are responsible for choosing whether and how much to eat.

Even if parents have already gotten into a negative food relationship, they can step back and trust that over time, the children will naturally begin to make more balanced choices on their own. (This method is suitable for children who do not have medical or other issues interfering with their eating habits.) Removing parental force and judgment from the picture is important to creating a long-term healthy relationship with food, as well as removing the momentary stress of mealtime battles.

Most doctors agree that if a child’s diet is relatively balanced over the course of a week, it’s okay if not every particular meal includes all food groups. Most childhood eating preferences are not strong enough to prevent the child from getting enough nutrition over time.

If you’re still worried that your child is missing out on some beneficial food groups, you can always resort to crafty tactics to add a nutritional boost to the kids’ preferred dishes. Ground flax or chia seeds can be camouflaged relatively easily into sauces, smoothies and baked goods to add protein and fiber. A variety of healthy veggies can be blended into a sauce you can use on pasta or pizza. And as important as what you do provide is what you don’t provide — skimp on snacking to ensure kids show up to meals ready to eat.

While it’s important to stay calm and accepting, the longer picky habits continue, the harder it becomes for the child to resume normal eating behaviors. Parents should encourage a spirit of exploration and curiosity. Continue to offer a variety of foods and put them on the child’s plate — don’t stop offering a food that the child disliked



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## “What begins with a specific sensitivity can lead to an overall anxiety and resistance to trying new foods.”

once, because you never know when tastes may change (research suggests it takes more than ten tries to become used to a new flavor). You can try the “when/then” strategy to encourage children to try just one bite of each food before deciding whether to continue; “When you have tasted a bite of the chicken, then I’ll serve the pasta.” Engaging children in the processes of shopping, menu planning and food preparation is another fun and effective way to motivate them to partake of the finished products.

Even children with serious sensitivities can learn to respond more calmly to things that bother them. Teach them to quietly push the offending food to the side of their plate, scrape off “contamination” if necessary, and continue to eat their preferred food. If the pickiness remains a problem, this will at least minimize the stress and disruption it often causes and can help the child learn to cope with feelings of anxiety instead of allowing them to escalate.

Did you just roll your eyes because you’ve already tried all these suggestions and they were ineffective? Picky eating becomes a true concern when it interferes with a child’s nutrition or socialization. If the child is eating fewer than ten different foods or is limited to a certain food group, his reaction to disliked foods is extreme, sitting down to a meal with him puts the whole family on edge, and no amount of encouragement has made any difference, it’s time to get help. Children with moderate to severe picky eating, now technically called “selective eating,” can be at risk for anxiety, depression and nutritional deficiencies later on.

Children who resist eating normally may be uncomfortable due to digestive issues such as allergies, food sensitivities or reflux. Parents should discuss concerns about their children’s eating habits with their pediatrician to rule out these possibilities and provide medical treatment if necessary.

Many cases of selective eating involve sensory integration dysfunction. A child with oral defensiveness, for example, may

be uncomfortable with certain textures and extremely resistant to trying new foods. They may avoid, react strongly or even gag when forced to try foods with strong flavors or stimulating texture. On the other hand, under-sensitivity (hyposensitivity) can also cause strong food preferences. These children may avoid bland foods and seek those that provide oral stimulation, such as a hefty crunch.

Sensitivity and behavior tend to interact in a vicious cycle. What begins with a specific sensitivity can lead to an overall anxiety and resistance to trying new foods, while the lack of exposure to new foods keeps them unfamiliar and unliked. Food sensitivities can lead to tension at the table, affecting socialization and family relationship dynamics.

Speech language pathologists are trained to evaluate all aspects of feeding, and can help diagnose and treat the problems contributing to your child’s feeding difficulties. A therapeutic plan for selective eating would generally include intra-oral stimulation for sensory dysfunction, desensitization (increased exposure to new tastes and textures) and strategies to address the social and behavioral aspects of the problem.

With calm, practical strategies and professional help when needed, most children can learn healthy eating habits for life. ●

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*Professor France Weill, PhD, CCC-SLP, of the Graduate*

*Program in Speech Language  
Pathology at Touro College,  
generously contributed  
her time and  
expertise in feeding  
problems and  
remediation.*



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