



STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO

Feeding Fussy Eaters

End meal time stress with simple strategies to
feed your picky eater with confidence

Raise your hand if you have a picky eater in your house!

I think most parents have experienced the power struggle of at least one picky eater in their household at one time or another. I too have my hand raised. As a registered dietitian I thought I had all the tools to be successful. Before having kids I was certain my kids would eat a variety of foods. I tried to eat healthy foods and practice a healthy lifestyle while they were in utero. And when my first child was born I did all the right things: made my own baby food and offered lots of new tastes and textures. I was appalled when my daughter already had made decisions that she didn't like certain foods. That reality sunk in pretty quick that I had a picky eater on my hands.

The toddler years in particular can be difficult to navigate. Take a deep breath, it's not just you. Kids are experiencing many new flavors, textures, and smells for the first time. Your child's decision to not eat a meal can cause increased anxiety and more push back at meal time, but don't stress. Fussy eating is completely normal. The good news is there are several things that we can do as parents to help them have a positive experience around new foods.

I have learned so much through the years as a dietitian and mom to picky eaters. It brings me joy to share these insights with other parents to give them the same kind of success and peace at the dinner table.

Let's start off by defining the term *picky eater*. A picky eater is generally classified as a part of a spectrum of feeding difficulties. It is an unwillingness to try new or familiar foods, especially strong flavors. It is totally normal for a child to refuse occasional new foods and have a dislike for certain flavors or textures. But if you find your child sticking their nose up at a majority of meals and meal times are a battle, you might have a fussy eater on your hands. Some children have sensory issues, which in turn makes it even more difficult to feed them at times. Talk to your pediatrician for further guidance if your child has sensory issues or other feeding difficulties that are causing picky eating behaviors.

Let's take a trip down memory lane for a minute! Take a moment to stop and think about how you were raised around food. Did your parents follow the clean plate club rule? Were desserts forbidden? Were meal times structured? Did you have family meals or eat in your room? Did your parents follow a meal plan? Sometimes, whether we realize it or not, the way we feed our kids is often a result of how we were raised around food. If you were raised in a home where unhealthy habits were created around food, you may find yourself doing the same.

When you think about feeding your family, do you find yourself having positive thoughts, or do you dread meal time? Do you find yourself constantly negotiating with your kids? Do you and/or your child leave the table upset? Are you fed up being a short-order cook and just let everyone choose their preferred food? Let's dive into simple strategies you can start today!

Road Map to Success

Here are nine tips you can implement immediately to bring peace back to meal times and enhance your child's food repertoire.

01

First try and try again!

- Did you know it takes 10+ exposures to a new food for a child to really know how they feel about it? But did you also know that an exposure doesn't mean they have to actually chew and swallow the food each time? Imagine going to a new restaurant and being served an unfamiliar food that looks and smells very unappealing. Now imagine someone forcing you to chew and swallow it. This is how kids feel as they are being served different foods all the time. Follow the order below for the best ways to help kids try new things.
- Lick it - yes, even licking the food counts as "trying it." Plus, young kids find this fun and rarely turn down the opportunity to be silly.
- Touch the food to their lips
- Put food in mouth and allow them to spit it out
- Put in mouth and chew (may spit out food if not ready)
- Chew and swallow food

Gradually working up to consuming the particular food decreases anxiety and brings peace to family mealtime. Download my free chart of foods that your child is learning about, likes, or loves to help them as they continue to broaden their taste preferences. This process may feel slow, but that's okay! The main goal is to not force your child to eat.

02

Offer safe food items

This is probably the most effective tool I have found for picky eaters. When your child sits down at the dinner table they may feel stressed to see a plate full of food they haven't learned to like yet, which can cause tantrums and arguments. But this trick will save your meals time and time again! Safe foods are items your child has already learned to like and enjoys eating.

And you can rest assured that if they eat nothing but their safe food, they can walk away from the table feeling like they got enough food. By offering a safe food on your child's plate, they can come to the table not fearful of feeling hungry, but knowing that they have something to satisfy their tummies. For some kids these safe foods may include yogurt, bread with peanut butter, finger food items, applesauce, etc. You can even try this with snack foods when introducing a new item. You will be surprised at how effective this change can be at your meals.

03

Keep meal times peaceful

- Sitting together at the kitchen table should be a time for family members to bond and share highs and lows about the day. It's a great opportunity for your kids to open up about their day and be together as a family. Your child should be able to sit down at the table at the end of the day and feel excited for the meal rather than stressed about what they may be forced to eat. Think about what an inviting space would look/feel like during the meal or snack. Sometimes that includes lighting a candle, dimming the lights, or playing peaceful music in the background. Try to keep arguments away from the table. That might mean handling a dispute before sitting down for the meal to prevent negativity around the table.

04

Model good eating behaviors for your kids

- Healthy eating habits start with the parents being a good example. I have a hunch that if you make a big deal about a food item that looks unappealing, your kids likely won't want to eat it either. If you made a new recipe and feel a little uncertain about it yourself, talk to your kid about your thoughts. Let them know that you too can have fears about trying new foods, but you're excited to experience it with them. Take time to sit down with your kids. Studies show that kids who experience meals as a whole family are less likely to use drugs or alcohol, suffer from depression or anxiety, and perform better in school. I also encourage keeping meal time out of the living room where the TV and other distractions can interfere with hunger/fullness cues.

05

Use language that encourages trying food

- A phrase I hear all the time that makes me cringe is, “*you can try it but you probably won’t like it.*” Using phrases like this plant the idea that this particular item likely has flavors that are undesirable. Consider using phrases like, “*You can absolutely try it. I would love to hear what you think about it.*” Allow them the opportunity to explain in their own words what they are experiencing when they try a new food. After trying the item, you can also state what you thought in order to help give them language about the items and learn more about their taste preference.

06

Use food play

- Parents of young children find food play to be a useful tool, particularly kids with food neophobia. It's okay to let your child use their hands to play with the food. If your child has extreme picky eating tendencies, you may find food play to be very effective. Take time away from the table to experience food. For example, if your child is struggling to try celery, allow them to paint with it or make a craft. Use berries as pieces for a board game. Think outside the box to help your child become more comfortable with being around certain foods.

07

Use the same food in different forms

- It's helpful for kids to see that foods can be served in different shapes, tastes, and textures. If your child dislikes sweet potatoes, try cutting a sweet potato into fries and air fry or bake them. Better yet, show them they can also do this with some of their favorite foods. Many parents tell me their child likes chicken nuggets, but they have a hard time eating a chicken breast. Try making homemade chicken nuggets to see a slightly different shape and taste. This allows your child to experience the same taste and texture, but in different ways.

A cookie cutter is a fun tool to help change the shape of favorite foods while offering the same taste. This helps kids to feel safe eating foods in various forms. Next time you make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, allow your child to cut it into fun shapes to show the food tastes the same, but the shape is different. If your child only drinks milk in an orange cup, try putting it in a mug. If your child only eats off a divided plate, consider using a smaller adult plate on occasion. All these slight variations help your child shift from thinking certain foods can only look a certain way to be accepted.

08

Meal plan as a family

- As the parent we like to be in charge of our child's diet and the nutritious foods we offer. Allowing your child to help meal plan can give them a sense of control over their diet and can spike an interest in meal times. Ask your child what specific foods they would like to see at supper one night of the week. This may mean they pick the safe food item and you choose the rest. I also recommend taking your child grocery shopping to look for new items to try together. One of my favorite things to do with my kids is to go to the grocery store and stroll through the produce aisle. I allow them to pick out an unfamiliar fruit or vegetable to take home and try. It's fun to prep together and allow their taste buds to experience new flavors. I like trying these items at snack time paired with a favorite thing to eat.

09

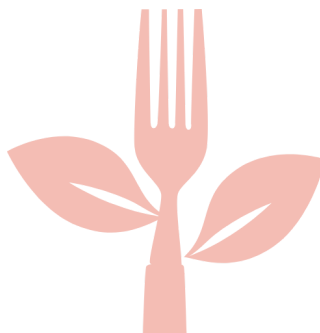
Add sprinkles!

- Yeah, you read that right. When all else fails, add sprinkles to the new food. Trust me, kids find this to be super fun and makes the item way more appealing to little ones. My kids love adding sprinkles to yogurt, oatmeal, or any food that is less than desirable. Give it a shot!

In Summary

Don't stress if your child currently prefers "junk food" over healthy food choices. Don't put so much pressure on meal times. The best thing you can do is to be consistent and remember to keep offering. Give these tips a try at your meals and observe how your child's eating behaviors and food preferences begin to shift over time.

Consult your family physician if your child demonstrates extreme food aversion or sensory issues.



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