

Picky Eating Playbook



“Picky” eating behavior — not wanting to try new or non-favorite foods — usually starts at about two years old. This is the same time that toddlers want independence in all things, not just food! **Picky eating is a pretty typical phase in many children’s lives.**

Many caregivers worry that their picky eater is not getting enough food to grow. In most cases, they are. But this can be a tough time for caregivers. You might feel worried, frustrated or annoyed! Here are some ideas to make the picky-eating phase a little easier.

You and your child have a job at mealtimes

Ellyn Satter, an expert in children’s feeding, explains that:

- Caregivers are responsible for providing healthy foods at meal and snack times.
- Children are responsible for what and how much they eat.

This approach helps children learn to make healthy choices. They learn what it feels like to be hungry and then eat enough to feel full.

Some caregivers worry that if they don’t “make” their child eat, they won’t eat enough. But that hardly ever happens. Almost all children will eat enough to grow well. (Remember, toddlers have small tummies!)

Picky eater hacks

Here are ideas for helping your child enjoy a range of foods.

Your role

- Plan to serve 3 meals and 1 or 2 snacks a day. Avoid letting your child snack throughout the day.
- Eat meals together. Mealtimes are great for talking and having fun as a family. And your child is watching you, so try to eat a variety of foods yourself!
- Buy the foods you want your child to eat. If your child is only asking for chips, you can avoid a power struggle by not having any at home. They’ll be more likely to accept something else. Some foods and snacks can be “special” when you are not eating at home.
- Avoid showing disgust when you are trying new foods. We know from research that when parents showed they didn’t want to try a new food, their children didn’t either.
- Make meals together. When children “help,” they’re more likely to taste and try at mealtime. Your child can pitch in with measuring, pouring, or stirring.
- Keep trying! Your child may need to be offered a new food **more than 10 times** before they try it. (This can feel frustrating for adults!) Don’t waste a lot of food. Just keep putting a little bit on their plate, again and again.



Mealtime suggestions

- Put new foods next to a food your child likes. If scrambled eggs are a “new” food, you might offer it with familiar foods, like a bagel or string cheese.
- Start small. Start with one leaf of spinach or one brussels sprout, not a spoonful.
- Dip it! Little ones love to dip. Pair new foods (like broccoli) with healthy dips like yogurt, hummus, or ketchup.
- Give your child a sense of control. Let them show you where to put the peas, the chicken, and the potato.
- Respect your child’s sensory preferences. Does your child have trouble with “mushy” foods? Then offer apple slices instead of applesauce.
- Avoid nagging and negotiating. “You can have a cookie if you eat one more bite!” This teaches children to ignore their feelings of fullness. And for children who want to be independent, it may make them less likely to try a new food.
- Keep mealtimes short—15 minutes or so. Let your child get up when they’re done.
- *If your child has a developmental delay or disability, ask your healthcare provider or early intervention team about feeding supports and resources in your area.*

Worried about your child’s eating or weight gain? Contact your child’s healthcare provider ASAP.

Ask a lot of questions!
Learn more about how much they should weigh, how tall they should be,
and how much they should be eating at this age.

Text **SPARKS** to **274 448**

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