



Picky Eating

...bringing the joy back to mealtimes.

Picky eating can be hard for parents and caregivers. If your child eats a small number of foods and refuses others, you are not alone. It can help to view 'picky eaters' as 'learning eaters', as learning to eat is a skill that needs to be practiced, just like learning to walk or talk.

How to Support Your “Learning Eater”

I. Share the Responsibility

Learning how to eat is the responsibility of both the parent/feeder and the child/eater. When children are trusted to listen to their bodies about hunger and fullness, it helps them develop a good relationship with food.

Sharing the responsibility means:

- Parents/caregivers decide the:
 - **What, when** and **where** of feeding
- Children decide:
 - **How much** and **whether** to eat

Parent/Caregiver Feeding Roles:

What food and drink to offer

- Be mindful of your child's likes but do not cater to them. Prepare the same meal or snack for everyone.
- Give your child a choice between two items (e.g. do you want yogurt or cheese with your apple slices?) instead of asking “what do you want?” for meals or snacks.
- Aim to include a variety of foods such as protein foods, whole grains, vegetables and fruit throughout the day.
- When introducing a new food, offer it with a familiar food they will eat.

When to serve meals and snacks

- Have a routine. Offer 3 meals and 2-3 planned snacks per day instead of making food available at all times.
- Offer water between regular meals and snacks. This will teach your child to come to table hungry.



Where to serve meals and snacks

- Aim to sit-down together. This could be at a table, in a circle of chairs, or on a blanket.
- Limit distractions such as the TV, phones and toys.
- Use this time to connect with each other. Talk about something besides the food and eating.

Child's Eating Roles:

How much to eat/drink from the foods you offer.

- Trust that your child will eat the amount that is right for their growth and activity needs.
- Expect the amount your child will eat may vary from day to day.

Whether they are going to eat/drink the foods you offer.

- Trust that your child will eventually learn to like a variety of foods and know that this can take time.
- Expect that it may take several times before the child accepts a new food.

2. Remove pressure around eating.

Many children want to be independent and eating is one part of their day-to-day routine where they have some control. When a child is pressured to eat, it can make the mealtime a negative experience and make trying new foods even harder. What can pressure look like?

Pressure can seem positive: Encouraging, praising, reminding, bribing, rewarding, playing games, talking about nutrition, and talking about how great the food is.

Pressure can be negative: Restricting amounts or types of food, shaming, criticizing, or withholding dessert or fun activities.

Pressure can feel like good parenting: Reminding your child to eat certain foods, having a 'one bite' rule, making your child eat their vegetables, warning they will be hungry if they don't eat or hiding vegetables in other foods.

Pressure can be hard to detect: Are you doing something to get your child to eat more, less or different food than they decide on their own? If yes, it is pressure.

3. Provide opportunities to build comfort with food.

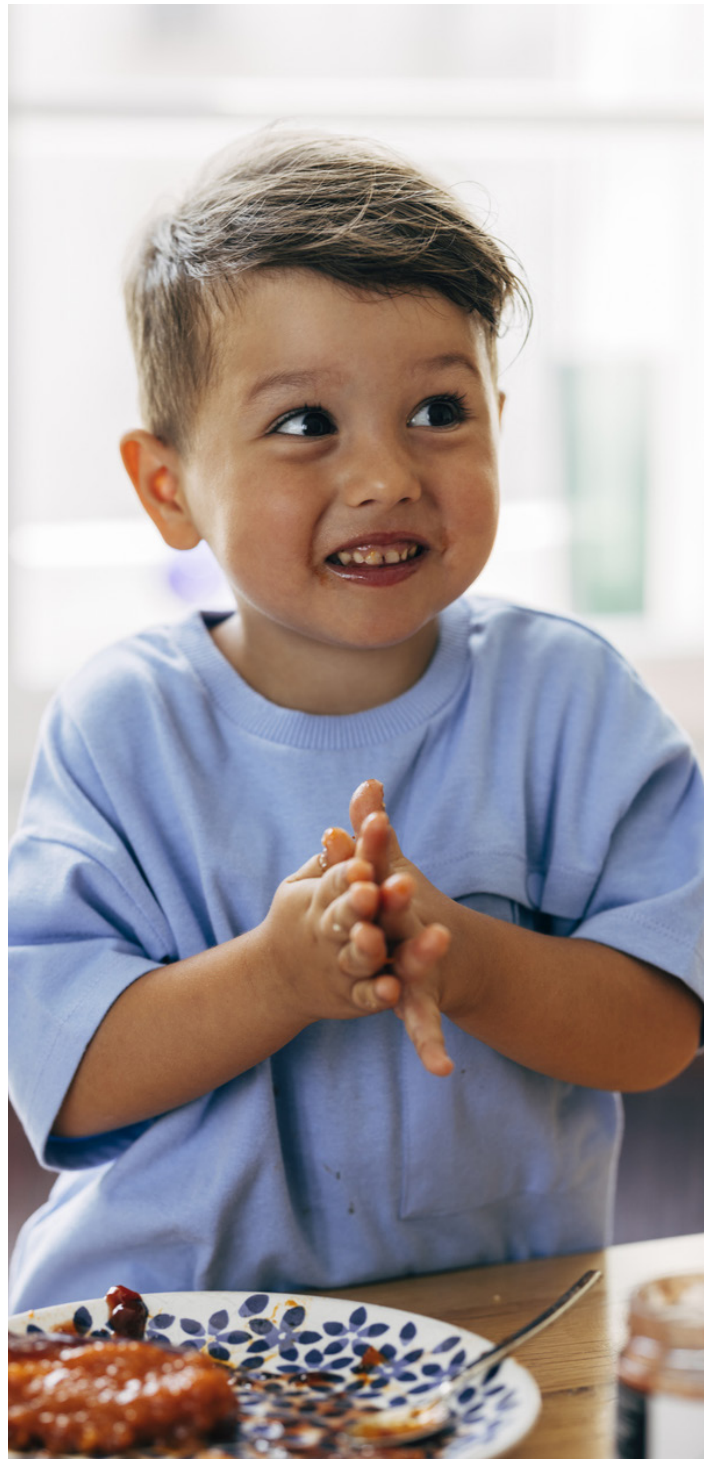
Be a role model. Your child will be more willing to try new foods if they see others at the table doing it. Aim to eat meals and snacks together, when possible.

Get kids involved. Invite your child to help prepare parts of the meal or snack together, and let them touch and explore new foods without the pressure to eat them.

Set a timer. After 15-20 minutes, let your child leave the table. Offer food again at the next scheduled meal or snack.

Try and try again. Continue to offer new foods. It can take many times before a food is accepted.

Set the mood. Aim to make mealtimes fun and enjoyable. Try playing music, or starting the meal with a quick ice breaker!



| If this is a challenge... | Try this! |
|--|---|
| My child eats the same foods all the time. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer new foods with liked foods. • Continue serving small portions of new foods in different ways (e.g. carrots could be sliced, shredded or matchstick). • Role model eating the food at the table with your child. • Keep serving the food. It can take many exposures until a child feels comfortable trying a new food. |
| My child will only eat if promised dessert. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve dessert WITH the meal instead of after. This prevents children from rushing through a meal or overeating at a meal just to get dessert. |
| My child needs a different meal than the rest of the family. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve the same meal to everyone, but provide at least 1 safe food that you know your child will eat, if hungry. • Invite your child to help with meal planning, grocery shopping and meal preparation. |
| My child snacks all day. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set daily meal and snack times and stick to a fairly regular schedule. • Space snacks at least 1.5 to 2 hours before the next meal to make sure your child is coming to the table hungry. • Offer 3 meals and 2-3 snacks per day. |
| My child is refusing to eat. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay calm: a skipped meal will not hurt a healthy child. • Trust your child to listen to their body. • Remove the food without fuss after a reasonable length of time (20-30 minutes). • Invite your child to help with meal planning, grocery shopping and meal preparation. • Space snacks at least 1.5 hours before the next meal to make sure your child is coming to the table hungry. |
| I think my child is eating too much. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust your child to listen to their body. This means that children will sometimes ask for a second serving and sometimes only take a few bites. • Offer regular and consistent balanced meals and snacks during the day. • Use something other than food as a reward, such as kind words, a game, an experience or quality time with a parent. • Do not restrict food from your child. If you have concerns, always speak to a doctor or dietitian. |
| My child does not eat fruits and vegetables often. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve with different dips. • Serve cooked, raw or even frozen! • Keep serving small portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables in different ways. • Serve a fruit and/or vegetable at each meal and snack. • Try growing your own fruits or vegetables and involve your child in the process, or go to a "pick your own" farm. • Role model eating fruits and vegetables in front of your child. • Invite your child to help with meal planning, grocery shopping and meal preparation. |
| My child drinks less than 2 cups of milk per day. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make popsicles from milk and frozen fruit. Blend and add skim milk powder to help thicken and freeze. • Blend milk and fruit together to make milkshakes and smoothies. • Add milk into hot cereals, sauces and baked goods. |
| My child drinks more than 3 cups of milk per day. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer water in between meals and snacks. • Serve milk in an open cup. • Continue to breastfeed on demand up to 2 years and beyond. |
| My child drinks more than 1 cup of 100% pure juice each day. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve vegetables and fruit more often than juice. • After 1 cup of juice, offer water if still thirsty. |

Commonly Asked Questions

Q: If my child won't eat vegetables, will they miss out on key vitamins and minerals?

A: Many children prefer the sweeter taste of fruit. Fruit can be a good substitute while your child learns to enjoy vegetables as well. Fruits and vegetables share many of the same vitamins and minerals.

| Nutrient | Vegetable Source | Fruit Source |
|------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Vitamin A | Carrots | Apricots, cantaloupe, mango |
| Folic acid | Spinach | Strawberries, oranges |
| Potassium | Potatoes | Bananas, oranges |
| Vitamin C | Broccoli | Kiwi, citrus fruit |

Q: Why do you suggest not hiding vegetables in meals and snacks?

A: While adding vegetables into meals and snacks that are "hidden" from kids as part of a recipe isn't a problem, regularly relying on this isn't recommended for a few reasons:

- It can send the message that vegetables are a bad food or not enjoyable
- It doesn't help with the long-term goal of raising eaters who enjoy a variety of foods, including vegetables
- It reduces exposure to vegetables that is important for learning eaters. For example, if vegetables are blended into pasta sauce, you might not serve vegetables as part of that meal in addition to the sauce.
- If a child doesn't trust what food is being provided, it can make picky eating worse

Q: If my child won't eat meat, should I be concerned?

A: Avoiding meat is not a concern as long as your child is getting the nutrients they need from other foods. Foods like eggs, beans, peas, lentils, nuts, seeds, tofu and fortified meat alternatives can help take the place of meat.

Try these tips:

- Add beans or lentils to your favourite recipes
- Add tofu to a vegetable stir fry
- Spread peanut butter on whole grain crackers or apple slices
- Sprinkle nuts and seeds on yogurt
- Dip vegetables or pitas in hummus

If your child doesn't eat entire food groupings (e.g. no fruits or vegetables, no protein foods), talk to your doctor or a dietitian to make sure they are getting everything they need from their diet.

Where Can I Find More Information?

Speak to a Registered Dietitian for free by calling 8-1-1

Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit • www.hnhu.org

Unlock Food • www.unlockfood.ca

References:

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