

The Making of a Healthy Eater: Winning the Finicky Eater Battle

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Perhaps no single factor influences a child's health and lifelong well-being more than food patterns established early in life. Contrary to many parents' assumptions, children are not by nature finicky eaters. On the contrary, childhood is characterized by exploration; and children are naturally curious about foods, their textures, shapes, colors, and flavors. Parents too often create finicky eaters by conveying their own likes and dislikes to their children through words and actions.

The Basics, A Child's Role

Remember, a child is not an adult dressed in kids' clothing. His role in developing into a healthy eater is being himself and exploring the world around him. Specifically, he needs to focus on the task at hand — eating. Sometimes this can be difficult if his eating environment is filled with too many distractions. Below is a list of other factors to consider when feeding preschoolers:

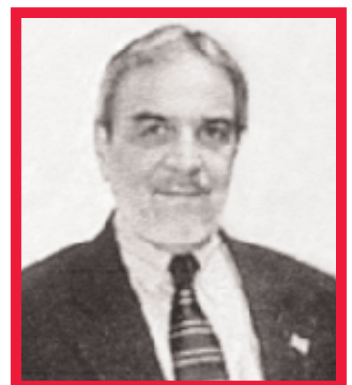
- Children will often play with food and anything else nearby because play is an important means of learning. If playing at mealtime becomes excessive, you may need to consider making adjustments, such as eating meals only at the dinner table, turning off the television, or perhaps playing music familiar to your child —



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visual distractions are often as problematic as physical ones. The important thing is to keep your child focused on the task at hand — mealtime. If a dinner table is not present, a small play table set aside only for a child's mealtime is highly recommended. The idea is to promote consistency and routine so a child learns to distinguish mealtime from all else.

- Children need smaller portions than adults. Approximately one tablespoon for every year of a child's age is sufficient through age three. For instance, two tablespoons of chicken, two tablespoons of carrots, and two tablespoons of potatoes would be appropriate for any two year old.
- Parents should help children cut up food into small bite sized pieces. This is especially true for problematic choking foods like hot-dogs, hard cheeses, and fruits. Microwaves can produce hot spots which can burn the child's mouth, making it even more necessary that parents thoroughly cut up microwaved food items.
- Adult utensils, especially cups, are difficult for children to grasp, making spills more likely. It can help a child feel more confident at mealtime if smaller cups and utensils are available, and it will save parents valuable clean-up time.
- Finger foods are almost always more universally accepted and eaten by children than more difficult to eat foods which require utensils. A crunchy green broccoli spear is more likely to find its way into a child's mouth than hot steamed broccoli requiring a fork. Always be sure to cut hard to chew foods into small bite sized pieces before serving.

Because of a child's small size, she will not be able to get a third of the calories she needs from three square meals that adults do. For this reason, snack time is an important mealtime for toddlers and should be treated with the same level of importance as the evening meal. Snack times should be scheduled no later than two hours before lunch or dinner time meals. In this way, a preschooler is sure to be hungry when the rest of the family sits down for lunch and dinner.

Parents and Food Patterns

While children may need direction from parents when it comes to food decisions, children know best and should be trusted with deciding when they are hungry and when they are full. If these decisions are left to the child, she invariably will eat enough to get the nutrients that will allow her to grow and stay healthy. Chil-

dren have their own internal signals for hunger, satiety, and nutrient needs which often mirror growth cycles. Growth spurts are universally accompanied by increased appetite while periods of slow growth are accompanied by reduced appetite, which should not be misconstrued as finicky eating.

Parents can and do impact a tremendous influence on a child's eating behavior. Experts agree that it is the parents' responsibility to provide balanced, varied, and tasty meals or snacks for their children. However, forcing toddlers to clean their plates or providing inducements (bribes) to try new foods set up patterns that are counterproductive and may be harmful to a child's future eating behaviors. Below is a list of parental strategies which will increase the likelihood your child will become a healthy eater:

- **Parents as Gatekeepers.** Parents are the gatekeepers of foods brought into the house. If snack foods such as cookies, candy, soda, and potato chips are a staple in the household, your child will become accustomed to these foods being on hand and demand them over other more nutritious food items. To minimize these problems, try to avoid taking children grocery shopping with you. If that's not possible, have a list limiting snacks or treats to only those on the list.
- **Offer/Serve.** It is the parents' responsibility to offer and serve nutritious foods when their child is hungry. Children should be left to make the decisions about what to eat of those items served and how much to eat. Parents should be responsible for offering a variety of nutritious foods from many food groups, including milk, yogurt, cheeses, cereals, and whole grain foods like oatmeal, as well as fruits, vegetables, beans, and legumes. Even if a child rejects a food once, continue to offer that food occasionally. Children's food preferences can change through something as simple as familiarity with a food.
- **Role Modeling.** Children mirror parents' food patterns with great frequency. If you want your child to eat fruits and vegetables, then mom and dad need to do the same.
- **Maintaining a Sense of Humor.** Keep in mind that a child's development is dependent on his exploration of the world around him. Food, like other facets of learning, involves exploration and play. It is important to keep mealtimes as stress free as possible. By doing so, you will encourage your child's development of healthy eating behaviors that will last a lifetime.



Appropriate Food Substitutions for Toddlers

If you use	Substitute as often as possible . . .
Whole milk or 2% milk.....	1% milk
American, Swiss, or cheddar.....	Part-skim mozzarella or reduced fat cheese
Ice cream.....	Frozen yogurt
Sour cream	Non-fat sour cream
Fried chicken and fish.....	Fried chicken with the skin removed, baked fish
Regular hamburger, luncheon meat.....	Lean ground beef, deli chicken or turkey breast
Pastries, snack cakes.....	Angel food cake with fruit, fig bars, or graham crackers

Role of the Child Care Providers

Because today's children spend so much of their day in out of home child care programs, a substantial portion of a child's diet is out of the hands of parents. Because of this, child care workers need to be careful not to undermine parents' best attempts to create healthy eaters and in fact reinforce healthy eating behavior. Just like home, healthy meals and snacks should be provided on a regular and consistent schedule in an environment free of distractions. If a lunchroom is not available, it will be necessary to have children put away toys and games before the start of meal or snack time. Because children come into child care facilities and are cared for by a variety of providers in their formative years it cannot be emphasized enough that their influence is significant and affects a child's eating behavior, as well as the potential for optimal growth and well-being for many years to come.

Special Note about Children and Low Fat Diets

Children over the age of two are advised to eat a diet low in fat as well as high in fiber, as prescribed by the Dietary Guidelines for Healthy Americans — that is, less than or equal to 30% of calories from fat, less than 10% of calories from saturated fat, and less than 300 mg of cholesterol daily. While it is important to keep fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol to a minimum, don't go overboard! Without sufficient calories and nutrients, children cannot grow to their full potential. While certain foods should be eaten only in moderation, it is not advised that any particular foods be eliminated from a child's diet unless advised by a child's pediatrician or dietitian.

