

picky eaters

by Marie Hendrix

Each day quality child care programs strive to provide for the nutritional well being of their children. Staff thoughtfully prepare menus that target balanced diets and address caloric needs. Careful consideration to nutritional value and safety guides the process of selecting and preparing food. The outcome is appealing, developmentally appropriate, and nutritious meals. Yet this commitment of time, energy, and effort is of little benefit for many children. Picky eaters simply refuse all or part of the meal.

Picky eating is a common behavior in young children that appears in many forms and may begin at any age, although the peak time is during the toddler or preschool years:



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- ▲ some children exhibit strong food preferences from infancy
- ▲ others gradually limit their diets to only a few foods prepared in certain ways
- ▲ still others appear to suddenly begin exhibiting unique eating quirks
- ▲ often children reject all new or unfamiliar foods
- ▲ a child may go for days picking at meals and surviving on only small amounts of food

When a child refuses to conform to mealtime routines, parents and caregivers often become frustrated and perplexed.

As child care professionals, we must recognize that our knowledge of nutrition and food preparation alone is no match for a determined picky eater. Our standards charge us with the responsibility of meeting the nutritional needs of each child. Ultimately, however, we can only control the type, quality, place, and time food is offered. The adage, "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink" readily applies to children and food. Each child decides if and how much food to eat. This dilemma demands that we develop a thorough understanding of the factors that affect a child's eating habits and implement appropriate

strategies to support healthy eating behaviors.

The reasons for picky eating

Children become picky eaters for many reasons. Caregivers must look closely for clues to unravel the mystery of finicky eating. An understanding of child development and knowledge of the many factors that influence mealtime behavior are the investigative tools needed to reveal the nature of a child's unique eating habits.

Growth and development directly affect children's eating patterns. An infant grows rapidly during the first two years of life. By 12 months of age, the average infant's birth weight triples. By two years of age, babies typically quadruple their birth weight. However, after the age of two, a child's growth rate slows dramatically.

Between the ages of two and five, children gain only four to five pounds each year. This slower growth rate requires fewer calories and less food. Children's appetites change accordingly. An understanding of normal growth and development patterns prepares caregivers to recognize and anticipate these changes in toddlers' eating habits.

A child's feeding schedule impacts how much food they eat. In children, the size of the stomach is about the same as the size of their fists. Even small amounts of food fill their tiny tummies, suppressing their appetites. The adult standard of three-meals-a-day does not match their stomachs' smaller capacity. Therefore, caregivers should plan and provide a variety of highly nutritious healthy snacks as a natural extension of their meals.

Establishing a set schedule of breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner, and bedtime snack provides the opportunities needed to meet little ones' nutritional requirements. Scheduling frequent, regularly-spaced feedings throughout the day promotes a stronger appetite and provides greater motivation for children to eat.

Young children typically eat only when they are hungry. The predictable, routine pattern of alternating meals with snacks allows them to satisfy their hunger by filling their small stomachs and yet allows time for hunger to return, motivating them to eat their next mini-meal.

A healthy child has the innate ability to adjust his or her food intake to match the need for energy and growth over time.

Refusal to eat most or all of one or more meals is of little nutritional consequence for typical developing children. A child usually will compensate by eating more at later meals resulting in a well-balanced cumulative diet over the course of a week or so. Consistently scheduling meals and snacks consisting of small amounts of a variety of healthy foods throughout the day is necessary for them to meet their nutritional needs and maintain their energy levels.

Consuming high-calorie drinks can reduce hunger and result in picky-eating behavior. In order to promote a

balanced, well-rounded diet, caregivers must consider the amount of calories acquired through liquids. Toddlers and preschoolers often fill up on milk, juice, or soft drinks that suppress their appetite and leave no room for healthy food choices that promote optimal growth.

Young children are dependent upon caregivers to provide them with healthy drinks in appropriate amounts.

- ▲ The United States Department of Agriculture's dietary guidelines, issued in 2005, recommend that children ages two to eight consume two cups (16 ounces) of fat-free or low-fat milk products every day.
- ▲ Due to the high sugar content in juice that suppresses appetites and takes the place of more nutrient-laden intake, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants not drink juice before 6 months of age and that fruit juice be limited to 4 to 6 ounces per day for children one to six years old.
- ▲ Caregivers should not give children drinks such as sodas that have high sugar content and no nutritional value.
- ▲ Water is very important to maintain proper hydration and normal function of a child's digestive system and caregivers should offer it frequently.

The desire to independently move about and explore their environment is another factor that affects the eating patterns of young children. As toddlers develop the gross and fine motor skills needed to freely discover the world around them, they experience the thrill and satisfaction of independence. Their increased mobility allows them to easily move away from their caregiver and toward objects of interest. They are intrinsically more motivated to move than to sit still. For some, the call for exploration and movement is greater than their desire for food.

The challenge for caregivers is to combine a child's emerging independence and experimentation with mealtime activities. Presenting a variety of nutritious foods along with opportunities to practice emerging fine motor skills can pique their natural curiosity and satisfy their desire to "do it myself." Often toddlers need to experience the color, smell, texture, size, weight, and feel of food in play before they are willing to taste it. Children are more likely to eat food that they have thoroughly explored. Caregivers can encourage this important discovery process in the following ways:

- ▲ Offer a variety of new and familiar foods from all food groups.
- ▲ Involve children in the selection, preparation, and clean-up of meals.
- ▲ Add interest to food by cutting it into a variety of shapes, providing healthy dips, sauces, and toppings, and varying the look and presentation of food.
- ▲ Encourage the use of hands for self-feeding and sensory exploration of food.
- ▲ Allow the use of age-appropriate utensils such as spoons, forks, cups, and straws in sizes tailored to their needs.
- ▲ Talk about the food's color, shape, size, aroma, texture, and flavor.
- ▲ Set a good example. Children will mimic the eating habits of their caregivers and are more likely to eat a variety of nutritious foods when they see others do so.
- ▲ Tolerate the messy process of self-discovering the properties of food.
- ▲ Be patient and understanding. A child may need 10 to 15 exposures to a new food before they accept it.

The mealtime environment significantly influences a child's eating behavior. Mealtimes are events that involve far more than eating food. Not only are there distinctive tastes, smells, and textures for children to explore, but

lighting, sounds, visual stimulation, and overall feelings of comfort and security are a part of the experience. The combination of these environmental factors influences a child's eating habits and often contributes to picky-eating behavior.

Unique sensory processing abilities and preferences determine a child's response to these mealtime sensations. Careful observation by caregivers can support a positive mealtime experience for every child.

- ▲ Many children have strong sensory reactions. Respecting a child's preferences is critical to their positive experiences with food.
- ▲ Some are naturally more sensitive to taste, smell, texture, light, touch, temperature, sound, and visual stimulation. Low lighting, soft music, and few distractions (including television and toys) prevent over-stimulation and promote concentration on eating.
- ▲ Others have sensory systems that are underdeveloped. These children need more intense sensory input to stay alert and involved at mealtimes.
- ▲ Children with severely overactive or under-responsive sensory systems may benefit from a referral to an occupational therapist or speech language pathologist for assessment and intervention.
- ▲ Socialization is a major component of mealtimes. Pleasant, relaxed interactions and conversation promote positive mealtime experiences.

Children's physical and emotional states and temperaments, and those of their caregivers, shape children's eating habits.

The unique personality, characteristics, health, and mental outlook of a child or adult influence their reactions to events and interactions with others. Children who are high risk-takers, cautious spectators, demanding controllers, or laid back observers will respond differently to the same situation. Caregivers should

direct their own individual personality traits and interaction styles to guide all children to adopt healthy eating habits. Specific strategies can assist with this challenge:

- ▲ Avoid power struggles by supporting a child's emerging independence. Giving choices and encouraging exploration can reduce a child's resistance and defiance.
- ▲ Respect children's internal cues of hunger and support their ability to self-regulate their meal size in response to their nutritional and energy needs by never force-feeding children or requiring them to eat everything on their plate.
- ▲ Never bribe, punish, or reward children's eating behaviors. Research indicates that use of persuasion, threats, and promises of desserts and other rewards actually promotes the dislike of the food and encourages picky-eating behaviors.
- ▲ Verbally praise a child for making good eating choices. Studies indicate that this positive reinforcement is effective in promoting healthy eating habits.
- ▲ Limit mealtime conversation to positive and pleasant topics. Do not appear overly concerned by a child's poor eating habits at mealtime and avoid discussing or commenting on it.

Summary

Picky-eaters present unique challenges for their caregivers. Their refusal to conform to expected eating behaviors is often frustrating and worrisome. Knowledge of typical child development, effective behavior management strategies, and current best practices equip caregivers to deal confidently with this common childhood behavior. Use of these techniques will not likely change a child's eating habits immediately. However, through careful observation, attention to the many

factors that influence a child's eating habits, and consistency, caregivers can successfully help picky eaters to learn to make healthy eating choices for a lifetime.

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