

picky eaters

Palate, protection, or pampering?

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

Parent #1:

"Every time I serve something different, even if only a chunk of pineapple on pizza, one or more of my kids refuses to try it!"

Parent #2

"My daughter actually gags at the sight of a glass of milk!"

Parent #3

"My son won't eat anything but cornflakes — breakfast, lunch, or dinner!"

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word 'snapshot' of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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– Solution –

At a recent dinner one of my friends told about asking me (the group's supposed parenting 'expert') what to do about a 'picky eater.' She laughed as she described how I had thrown up my hands and said, "Darned if I know!" The truth is, as a mom of four proficient picky eaters, this topic has long challenged me.

Then another friend told about preparing separate meals for her sons and herself, due to food allergies. Upon hearing that, a third person, said, "I'd no sooner have served my boys different menus than I'd buy a ticket to the moon!" (Fortunately for everyone, her sons didn't have allergies.) But if you're like me, no matter what my head says, in my gut I am tormented that my darlings will starve to death — and it would be all my fault! Three themes are apparent from this discussion.

Three themes

The first theme, and most common cause is: palate. Palate affects our response to different tastes, and for children put that emphasis on *different*. This theme fits my situation well, since the more different a recipe is, the more eager I am to try it. In fact, our meals are often referred to as 'mom's experiments.' And that parent grumbling about not being able to add so much as a 'chunk of pineapple' to the family pizza, well — that was me!



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The friend with the allergy-prone sons articulated the next theme: Protection. Allergies are real medical conditions. The little girl gagging at the sight of milk could have a milk allergy. Of course, it could also be either 'palate' or 'pampering,' which brings us to our third theme.

The friend who declared that she wouldn't serve separate meals any more than buy a 'ticket to the moon' identified pampering when she targeted adult behavior. That mom serving cornflakes three times a day has a good chance of falling into this category.

Palate

In an episode of Oprah, her guest, Dr. Oz, said that children are born with a preference for bland foods, a valuable survival mechanism, since most poisonous plants have strong or bitter tastes. But in many cultures today, this predisposition for bland (or sweet) gets extended into adulthood. Palates don't grow without exposure to new tastes. A diet of macaroni and cheese, French fries, cookies, and cornflakes encourages palates to stay stuck in neutral.

It takes eight to 12 exposures for a food to become familiar. Teaspoon-size servings of different foods promote familiarity. Familiarity also increases when children help prepare food. Chopping the carrots for a pot of soup or stew often leads to a greater willingness to sample the end result. (For additional ideas for having children help with food preparation, please see Buffy Owens's article in this issue of *Exchange*.)

Protection

Children with food allergies need clear diagnosis and treatment guidelines. But simply eliminating a food is not enough. The nutrition that food provided will need to be replaced. If the girl in the example has a milk allergy, she will

need a substitute, such as fortified soy or rice milk, to supply her daily calcium.

If an allergen is life threatening, such as a peanut allergy, more vigilance is necessary. Parents and caregivers will need to read product labels and alert others to this child's needs. But two other things must happen, as well. The first and most important is to empower a child to monitor her own needs. I have seen a child as young as two-and-a-half refuse a cracker or cup of milk, because she knows it could make her ill. Knowledge is the best protection any child can have. As she grows, the instances when she will need to self-monitor, multiply.

This leads us to the other point — that of the psychological impact of a restricted diet. Avoid promoting resentment. Practice prevention. A sack of wheat-free crackers on a play date or when eating out meets a child's needs unobtrusively, without her feeling deprived. At a birthday party, supplying an egg-free cupcake allows her to participate fully. Food restrictions are a part of her life — but should never define who she is.*

Pampering

My favorite question when a parent says her child will eat 'only cornflakes' (or olives, pickles, etc.) is to ask, 'who buys the cornflakes (olives, etc.)?' Pampering is very seductive. A child may demand daily cornflakes, but his need is for nourishing food. Demands and needs are not the same. Meet needs, but limit demands.

A few years ago my husband and I attended our friends' 60th wedding anniversary. All twelve (that's right — 12!) of their children were present. Of course, we couldn't resist asking how they had managed to get 12 children fed, dressed, and to school on time. Their answer included morning routines, designated daily chores, and lots of organization. We tried to imagine what their

mornings might have been like if we juxtaposed some of the typical struggles heard in our parenting classes:

Mom: "Good morning, Jimmy. Would you like oatmeal or eggs today? Okay Mary. I'll switch your oatmeal to the pink bowl."

Dad: "Hans, Jennifer, Julie, please — try just one bite of toast. Martha, Samuel, and Sara — what would you like for breakfast?"

Mom: "But Jimmy, you said you wanted eggs. How about oatmeal? Now Robert, Jonathan, Lily, Benjamin, Arthur . . ."

Dad: "Sara, come back and sit in your chair. No, Mary, the purple bowl is dirty."

It gets ridiculous fast, doesn't it? My guess is that it sounded a lot more like this:

"Breakfast!" (And I doubt bowl color ever came up!)

Perhaps the next time you find yourself searching for that special flowered cup, box of cornflakes, or begging a child to 'try one bite,' pretend there are eleven others sitting at the table with the school bus due in two minutes. A little perspective cures a lot of pampering.

Peaceful meals

Once you have figured out which theme defines your picky eater, decide on a plan. If it is a 'palate' issue, try serving buttered beets (not the same ones, of course) until they seem familiar or alter the taste of macaroni and cheese with a bit of mashed squash. The repeated sight and varied taste of new foods will gradually expand your child's palate. If health needs require a special diet, practice both 'protection' and 'preven-

tion.' Keep acceptable alternatives available and teach your child what foods to avoid. Help him plan what to do when there are foods he can't eat. What can he eat instead? How can he refuse a food politely?

"No crackers, thank you. I brought the kind I can eat."

Finally, if your child 'won't eat anything but cornflakes' — remember who buys the groceries. Resist 'pampering.' Offer a variety of foods. A bit of disgruntlement or a missed meal won't result in malnutrition (really!). And — he could be one of 12!

*These same points apply to a child raised with religious or philosophical dietary restrictions.