

Picky Eaters

By Linda E. Chapman, Psychotherapist & Art Therapist

Having a child deemed to be a "picky eater" can be the bane of a contemporary, nutrition-focused parent's existence. Having a child who rejects healthy foods or family meals can exacerbate concern about children having a sufficient and balanced diet. All of this can lead to anxiety, irritation and regular battles.

If you are the parent of a picky eater, consider the following:

1. If your child is growing and developing properly, she is probably getting the essentials, whether or not you find this easy to believe as you watch her reject item after item.
2. Your job is to keep on offering a variety of healthy choices over time. Avoid letting her become overfull on highly fat, sugar and salted food because of your desperation or resignation that after all "she has to eat something." At some point (perhaps when your back is turned, or at someone else's home) she'll pleasantly surprise you by slowly but surely expanding her choices.
3. If you look at your child's food intake over a day, you will probably realize she is getting everything she needs over time, not necessarily in each sitting. Some days (especially active days) she will eat more, other days, correspondingly less. Of course, some children have smaller appetites, and your adult perception of what is a full meal may not jibe with what is true for her physiology. Check with your pediatrician if you feel you have distinct cause for concern.
4. Try making food choice and preparation fun: make faces out of the components of a meal; incorporate small amounts of newer foods with regular servings of foods that are "tried and true."
5. Include your child in food choice and preparation as much as possible. An increase in a real sense of empowerment could help decrease the need to battle over food.
6. Avoid using food for reward, withdrawal of it as punishment. Don't assign foods to "good" and "bad" categories.
7. Set a good example by eating a range of healthy foods yourself while with your child.

8. Think about how and why food became your battleground. It might represent other areas of control, power or struggles for dominance within your relationship with your child. There may also be residual messages and meanings from your own childhood that inform your reaction: food might have been a battleground or even an area of neglect in your household. Think about how it makes you feel when your child rejects the meal you've just made or bought. Then decide if this what you really want to tussle over.

Issues about food have practically and emotionally significant facets. Identifying and separating the strands of significance and dealing with each on its own terms will help you ensure she gets the nutrition she needs while avoiding futile and frustrating power struggles.

About the Author

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