



If Your Child Is Finicky



Children often eat small amounts, behave erratically about their eating and are fickle in their likes and dislikes. A parent may react to these behaviors by labeling their child finicky, or a picky eater. He's not. He's just eating normally for a young child. However, sometimes a child only eats from a limited list of foods, insists on those same foods again and again and even gets upset when he is offered foods that are not on the list. That child is finicky. Most times, parents want help *getting* their child to eat better. However, there's no way to get a child to eat if he doesn't want to. Instead, parents must stop pressuring the child to eat, and instead teach him to behave nicely at the table. Then his eating takes care of itself.

Is the finicky eater born or made?

Some children are naturally very sensitive to taste, texture, and smell. That can be positive or negative. They can enjoy food a lot, or they can be so upset by something they eat that they gag or throw up.

The finicky eater can also be *made*. Parents who take an interest in novel food and approach it with curiosity and optimism pass those same attitudes along to children. Parents who are offended by novel food and fussy about what they eat will often pass their fussiness along to their children. Parents who pressure their children to eat or offer too few opportunities to learn to like new food can turn their children into finicky eaters.

You can't get a finicky eater to eat; you can only teach him how to behave appropriately at mealtimes. Then you have to back off and let him take it the rest of the way. If he can stay calm, behave nicely and be polite but firm about refusing food, he will be able to ever-so-gradually approach new food and learn to like it. He will learn to sneak up on new food by looking at it, watching you eating it and tasting but not swallowing it (what do you think napkins are for?). After 10 or 15 or 20 tries, he may like it. In the meantime if he can say "no" to food, it frees him to say "yes" more often. Children always do more and dare more if they feel they have control over a situation.

Understand food acceptance skills

Essentially, the finicky or picky eater is a person who has poor food acceptance skills. If all goes well, by the time your child is five years old, he will have mastered the ability to approach new food and learn to like it. He will:

- Be calm in the presence of unfamiliar and disliked food.
- Know how to sneak up on new food and gradually get comfortable with it.
- Be able to "make do" with less-than-favorite food.
- Be able to politely turn down food he doesn't want to eat.

Your part is making a variety of food available—and taking no for an answer. If you are too pushy, your child will be rude, whiney or rigid to get you to back off. If you are a picky eater, you may have to master these behaviors right along with your child. Keep in mind that your child will only have positive eating attitudes and behaviors if you do.

Divide the responsibility for eating

Feeding children demands a division of responsibility: You are responsible for *what* your child is offered to eat, and for *where* and *when* it is presented. He is responsible for *how much* of it he eats, and even *whether* he eats [see *HELPING YOUR CHILD TO EAT WELL*]. Your job is to plan the menu, get the food on the table, and make mealtime pleasant. Your child's job is to eat—or choose not to. If you cross these lines, you're going to get into trouble. Children fight back when they feel pressured to eat.

Have meals at times that you set and maintain, and offer snacks mid-morning and mid-afternoon [see *SNACKS FOR CHILDREN*]. Don't let him graze for food, and don't give him food or beverages except for water between times. At meal and snack time, reassure your child that he doesn't have to eat if he doesn't want to, but again, here's his chance. Let him eat as much or as little as he wants, then put the food away. Keep mealtimes pleasant and light; don't use mealtimes for scolding. Include your child in the conversation, but don't make him the center of attention.

After you have done your jobs, trust your child to eat well. Children expect to grow up with their eating the same as with everything else they do. Trying a new food is a challenge. While it's important to reassure your child that he doesn't have to eat anything he doesn't want to, you can say, "When you get a little older you'll probably like this." If you can *definitely* take no for an answer, you may encourage him to try a new food. But don't insist. Take your child's word for it if he says he doesn't want something. If you provide regular and appealing meals and snacks, make meal-times pleasant and teach your child to behave nicely at mealtime, your child will eat. (Of course, your *example* of positive mealtime behavior is the most important teacher of all.) It may take time, but eventually your child *will* eat and enjoy a variety of food.

Offer a variety

Be considerate with menu planning, but don't cater to your child's preferences. At mealtime, offer a variety of foods—a main dish, milk, fruit or vegetable, bread, a second starchy food, butter or margarine—and let your child pick and choose from what's available. Don't limit the menu to foods your child will eat; just be sure to include at least one food that you know he usually likes. Have plenty of bread on the table. Generally, children can eat bread even when all else fails. Use fat to make the food taste good. See [MEALS FOR CHILDREN] for more specifics about menu planning.

Don't withhold dessert to force him to eat [see SHOULD YOUR CHILD HAVE DESSERT?], or jump up to short-order cook if he doesn't eat what's on the table. Both tactics teach him that it is desperately important that he eat. It's not. Simply reassure him that he doesn't have to eat, but that this is his chance for food. Don't expect him to try everything—he'll be cautious about new foods [see IF YOUR CHILD DOESN'T EAT VEGETABLES].

Sometimes he might not eat anything at all. Don't worry. He'll make up his nutritional needs at another meal or snack, later in the day or the week.

Limit between-time caloric beverages

Many times children eat poorly because they drink their food rather than eat it. Juice and milk are nutritious, but if your child gets too much, he will eat poorly. He won't have room for other nutritious foods, and he won't be interested in learning to like new foods. Drinking too much juice can also cause stomachaches and diarrhea. Give milk and juice along with snacks or meals. Offer your child water between times, not milk, juice, or other beverages that have calories in them. Limit your child's juice to 3 to 6 ounces a day. He will get enough milk if he drinks 16 to 24 ounces a day.

Struggles for control

Many times finicky eaters and their parents are involved in a struggle for control. Parents try to get the child to eat by reminding, bribing, and punishing. The child resists by dawdling or by being defiant or sneaky. Check yourself. You are being controlling if you:

- Frequently remind your child about what and how much he has to eat.
- Threaten him about what will happen if he doesn't eat.
- Bargain with him about eating.
- Reward him for eating.
- Bribe him to get him to eat.

You aren't providing enough structure and limits if you:

- Let him eat where and when he wants.
- Give him free access to the cupboard and refrigerator.
- Get up and make him special food if he doesn't like what's on the table.
- Let him have all the sweets he wants.

It is difficult to find the middle ground between being too rigid on the one hand and being too permissive on the other. If you have continued difficulty both giving your child limits and letting him have freedom within those limits, seek professional help. Your time and effort *now* can make an enormous difference later on.

For more about parenting your toddler or preschooler with feeding, see Ellyn Satter's *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Bull Publishing, 2000.

For more about planning and cooking meals that are appealing and appropriate for the big as well as little people at the table, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 1999.