

Picky Eater in Your House? Helpful Tips for Happier Meals

I do not like
green eggs and ham.
I do not like them,
Sam-I-Am.

- Dr. Seuss

Food fights. Negotiations. Mealtimes for hours. Only eating certain colors or foods in a particular order. Bizarre preferences like calling sauce “frosting” in order for it to be acceptable.

Sound familiar? Children can seem funny about food. But it’s important to keep in mind that for a child, eating is truly a learning experience and is ever-evolving from infancy all the way into adulthood.

Babies and children approach new food with caution and are said to have *neophobia*, which means fear of something new. This is normal. Children need to be exposed to new or unfamiliar foods about 10-20 times(or more!) before they begin to accept it. There are many theories behind this; one of which is that this kind of caution is an inherited survival mechanism to ensure food’s safety. Once children become accustomed to the taste and texture of a new food, most generally learn to like it and it becomes part of the group of familiar foods.

Food often becomes an issue because of parents or caregivers. Children need continuous exposure to the food, the support of trusted adults and the need **not to be pressured in any way** to eat. Even positive pressure, like a reward, decreases food acceptance.

Ellyn Satter, MS, RD, CICW, BCD, renowned expert on children and feeding, suggests:

- Have structured meals and snacks so that your child is hungry but not famished at mealtimes.
- Keep meals positive with no pressure to eat.
- Teach children to say “no thank you,” rather than “yucky” and excuse them from the table for poor behavior.
- Don’t make anything extra or special.
- Pair familiar food with unfamiliar or “not liked yet” food. Include one or two items he might ordinarily eat like a well-liked vegetable, fruit or milk.
- Let your child pick and choose no matter how hard for you! (Even if she eats 3 rolls and nothing else!)
- Model positive behaviors.



This may be hard to follow in practice, but it tends to produce competent and healthy eaters. For children that seem to surpass regular “picky eating” and get very upset or anxious around food, it may help to work with a doctor and/or dietitian that understands feeding issues and can provide additional support.