

“Yuck! I don’t like that.” If this statement is heard way too often during meal time, if your child refuses to eat anything but macaroni and cheese (or whatever food your child tends to fix on) and you have a hard time getting anything else in him, you may have a picky eater or worse a dysfunctional feeder on your hands.

Understanding picky eating is the first line of defense for survival. Picky eating is one of the most stressful phases of typical feeding development. Yes it is a typical phase, which means that they *will* grow out of it. There are many misconceptions about picky eating. Understanding picky eating and techniques to avoid mealtime battles will definitely prepare you as you enter the picky eating phase.

Picky eating is a typical phase of feeding development that occurs during the toddler period when your child is demonstrating independence and learning about choice making. Neophobia, the fear of new or different looking food occurs during this period. That is why your child may love pancakes but if you put blueberries in them or they look different in some way, your child may refuse. The picky eating phase coincides with a period in time when your child’s caloric needs and appetite is significantly less as compared to the newborn phase. Taking a gentle approach to feeding and staying calm is a good start.

Parents need to distinguish the difference between picky eating and dysfunctional feeding. Many parents say that they have a picky eater when their child is really a dysfunctional feeder. Picky eating should not be stressful. Your child’s appetite will vary by the day just like yours. Some days you eat more than other days. That is typical. You should be concerned that your child is a dysfunctional feeder if your child refuses most or all foods in a food group (such as veggies, fruits or meats), eats less than 20 different types of foods (4 flavors of yogurt do not count), is intolerant of “new” or non-favorite foods placed on her plate and refuses “family foods” requiring short order cooking. If your child exhibits one of these red flags, you should discuss this with your pediatrician, as a feeding consult is most likely warranted.

As mentioned before, if you stay calm and understand that picky eating is a phase, before you know it, your child will be a preschooler and the picky eating phase will be over. In the meantime, here are some ideas that will help you survive the picky eating phase:

- Family meals. Eating meals together is the single best strategy to deal with picky eating. You are the best model of healthy eating. When you eat a healthy varied diet, your child will want to eat like you. Remember, your child is watching you.
- Make sure that your family meal includes at least 1-2 foods that you know will be accepted.
- Never bribe, trick, play games, distract or force feedings.
- Do not use distraction during mealtime. Distractions such as TV, video games, toys etc. cause children to be less in tune to what their bodies are telling them about being hungry, being full or needing to eat more. As a result, the very distraction parents use to help encourage children to eat more immediately, may make them eat less for the long term.
- Do not short order cook. If you do, your child will learn quickly that if he/she refuses a food, you will accommodate or give in by offering desired foods. This reinforces picky eating and makes picky eating worse or more selective.
- Keep in mind that food preferences are a learned behavior. To maximize your child’s food repertoire, be conscious of your comments and body language about food. Model healthy eating and healthy food choices.

- Children eat best when they feel like it is their idea. Offer opportunities to go shopping, assist in meal planning and cooking.
- If your child wants to eat with his or her hands or eat his peas in his applesauce, let him or her. With reduced pressure, your child may decide that he is hungry and may eventually eat.
- Maintain regularly scheduled mealtimes and snacks. This will assist with self-regulation, which helps children understand that their bodies need to eat.
- Announce, "It's time to eat" instead of asking child to eat.
- Continue to offer foods that have previously been rejected. The biggest mistake a parent makes is to stop offering.
- Give your child time to eat (~30 minutes). Do not distract your child with TV, music or toys.
- Insist your child sits while eating. Eat at the kitchen table and sit your child in a chair that offers good support/posture.
- Encourage your child to sit at the table even if he/she refuses to eat. With reduced pressure, your child may decide that he/she is hungry and eat.
- Allow children to self-feed, as children with minimal self-feeding skills are more likely to reject food.
- Read your child's body language and pace feedings to child's comfort level.
- Redirect fussy children, example: "Show me how you drink from your big boy cup", "Show me how you chew your broccoli with your big boy teeth", "Do you want 5 peas or 10", "Listen to how loud this crunches".
- Avoid nighttime feedings. If your child refuses food offers only water at nighttime and your child will likely eat a healthy breakfast or make up the calorie deficit throughout the following day.

If you are concerned about your child's picky eating or your child has not "grown out" of the picky eating phase, contact your physician who can assist in a referral.