



The Happy Housewife's Guide to

DEALING WITH PICKY EATERS

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Disclaimer:

I am not a medical professional or a nutritionist. This book contains my opinions. If you have serious concerns about your child's diet please consult your family doctor.

Our Story

Picky eaters, we have all been one, had one, or known one. It's the child (or adult) that eats only a handful of foods, most of them lacking in any nutritional value. Picky eaters cause menus to be changed, plans to be rearranged and tears at meal time. Picky eaters can be one of the biggest struggles a parent will face, not only with menu planning and budgeting, but also with child rearing.

Before we get started, let me share my story.

Our first child ate everything as a baby. I fed her baby food from the store and she devoured every fruit, vegetable, and cereal they made. Around 18 months she decided she only wanted to eat dairy products and cereal. I didn't know what to do so I fed her dairy products and cereal. For almost a year she survived off a diet of cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese, macaroni and cheese, grilled cheese, and Cheerios.

She was always at the top of the growth chart, developmentally advanced, and never got sick. I wasn't worried too much about her diet, I figured it was just a phase. Being the only child, it wasn't hard to make a special meal just for her every evening. About a year after it started her pickiness ended as quickly as it began. She started eating anything and everything, and to this day loves a variety of foods.

When our second child was born he was a very sick baby. He had [failure to thrive](#) and at 4 months still looked like a newborn. He had terrible reflux and would projectile vomit after most of his feedings. If he wasn't vomiting he would just stop breathing... either way it wasn't good. He wasn't a big fan of baby food and I

am not sure what he ate his first year. His pediatrician was always trying different infant formula in hopes that he would grow and stop throwing everything up.

He was always on the small side of the growth chart and was developmentally delayed in almost every area. At some point during the toddler stage he decided he liked nuggets and fries. We were so excited that he was eating that we fed him nuggets and fries, ALL THE TIME! Since our daughter had gone through a similar phase two years earlier we figured this would pass and he would start eating other foods soon enough. Plus, our pediatrician encouraged this diet since we were finally getting him to eat something.

THREE YEARS LATER.... he was still living on a diet of nuggets and fries. We didn't want to make food an issue, we didn't want him to have weight problems later, we didn't want him to fall off the growth chart, but the nugget and fry diet was extremely inconvenient. When we ate dinner at someone's house my son wouldn't wouldn't eat. If we went out, we had to go somewhere that served nuggets and fries.

When baby #3 was born I didn't have time to make separate meals for my 4-year-old. We had a crash course in trying different foods. There were lots of tears (especially by me) and eventually this child learned to try the food we put in front of him each night.

Ten years later he is still my pickiest eater. But he eats what he's served, even if he doesn't like it. And he doesn't complain.

After all the struggles with our son, I was determined not to have a picky eater ruin dinners in our family anymore. I did not want fighting, tears, and struggles over food. As our family grew in size I realized that there was absolutely no way I could be a short order cook.

What Makes a Picky Eater?

Before we talk about how to deal with a picky eater, we first must determine if your child is a picky eater.

I do not like ice cream, pies, most cookies, or cakes, does that make me picky? My children refuse to eat most fast food, are they picky?

I think we call someone a picky eater because either:

1. They refuse to try new foods, or
2. They do not eat a diet of healthy foods.

I don't think anyone would say the following...

Little Tim is so picky. He refuses to eat white bread, Lucky Charms, and chicken nuggets. All he asks for are carrot sticks, apple slices, and whole wheat zucchini bread. He wouldn't eat his cinnamon roll yesterday morning at Burger King and when we came home he insisted I make him a bowl of steel-cut oats with blueberries. What am I going to do with that child?"

This child is being choosy about what he wants to eat, but he is making good choices.

Is this a heart issue or a stomach issue?

When a child is picky it is important to determine the "heart issue." Are they being defiant? Is the food something they truly dislike or are they not open to trying something new? Is this a battle of the wills? Is your child testing you? Or is

there an allergy or something else going on. It is up to you to figure out where the problem lies and act appropriately.

I have seen parents create works of art with their child's food to get them to eat it. The child doesn't dislike the taste of the food, they are just being difficult and the parent is bending over backwards to placate the child. If you have the time to turn your child's peanut butter sandwiches into teddy bears and hearts (regularly- I'm not talking about special occasions) then more power to you, but their spouse might not appreciate this technique in the future. Remember, the habits formed as a child will most likely carry over into adulthood.

Is your child associating a certain food with a bad experience? I once had a toddler throw up tri-colored rotini with red sauce all over me, and continued to throw it up for several hours, I haven't served tri-colored rotini since that incident. Could I eat it if I had too, sure, but even looking at the package in the store turns my stomach.

If your child dislikes a certain food because of a bad experience, give them some time and try the food again in a few months.

If your child eats a wide variety of foods and they come across something they don't like, give them a break. I have one child who eats; apples, oranges, watermelon, honey-dew, pineapple, bananas, corn, green beans, broccoli, lettuce, peas, peppers, and many other fruits and vegetables. He doesn't like fresh strawberries. When I serve strawberries I give him a small piece to try, but if his tastes haven't changed I don't worry too much about it, he eats lots of other good food.

Is this just a phase?

Is your child going through a phase? Many of my children have gone through a period where they only eat a handful of items. During these periods I continue to

offer all the foods they use to eat, but I don't force the issue. I will not however, substitute healthy foods with junk. If my child decides one day he only likes apples and stops eating other fruit, then he eats a lot of apples. I will not serve cookies and soda to replace the healthy foods he once enjoyed.

Many, if not all toddlers go through a “picky phase.” The most important thing you can do as a parent is to continue to offer healthy choices to your child. Often it is easier to give your child a cookie or let them live off Cheerios and graham crackers than to continue to slice up fruit or veggies they refuse to eat. Don't give up. Almost anyone is going to pick a “treat” over a carrot, but you will quickly condition your child to pass up healthy choices if they know they will get another option by refusing to eat what they are served.

It's Your Choice.

If your child refuses to try new foods you must make a choice. You can either make it an issue or ignore it. If you ignore it, chances are your child will develop an extremely limited appetite, which was the case with our son. How do they know they don't like something if they have never tried it?

If you make the decision that your children will try new foods, create guidelines and stick to them. Whether it be the two bite rule, the one food you never have to eat rule, or the eat it for breakfast if you don't finish it for dinner rule, be consistent.

I cannot stress how important it is to stick to your guidelines. Whatever you decide, make it very clear to your child what is expected of them at mealtime. If you are always changing the rules, your child will be confused and not know what is expected of them.

Who's The Boss.... You Are!

There are other times when battles over food are just another way of your young child attempting to take the lead in your relationship. It has nothing to do with taste, texture, allergies, or negative experiences. It is a way to get attention and get what they want. Who, when given the choice, would not want to eat a diet of junk food and soda pop? I am sure many of us would choose cake over a carrot most days of the week.

If you are not sure if you are dealing with an attitude issue ask a trusted friend or family member if they see evidences of willful disobedience during meal time.

If you determine it is an issue of wills, then it is important you take charge of mealtime and set down some guidelines to make mealtime a pleasant and healthy experience for everyone.

Helpful Tips For Taming the Picky Eater

State Your Expectations.

If your child is old enough to understand, explain to them that you are going to be making some changes during meal times. Let them know what you expect of them, and what the consequences will be if they chose not to participate.

Start Early.

Baby food is for.... no one! Some of my children ate very little baby food . When they were old enough to start eating I would mash up whatever we were eating and feed it to them. My youngest daughter refused to eat baby food at all. Her first meal, spicy black beans and rice! She ate an entire plateful!

While I don't think baby food is a bad thing, I do think that it can create a division, baby food/ adult food. Young toddlers get use to eating special food and can have a hard time adjusting to "people food." (*Disclaimer: Several of my children ate baby food from six months to one year and are great eaters*)

As soon as you know that your child doesn't have food allergies, start introducing new foods. There is no reason a child, who has a mouthful of teeth, cannot eat the same thing you are eating for dinner.

Start Slow.

Changing the way your child eats probably won't happen overnight. It is also important to remember that children don't always respond well to drastic change. If your child has been use to a steady diet of Gerber Puffs and Goldfish, don't dump them all in the garbage and hand them a plate of steamed broccoli and rice.

Introduce new foods slowly, and in small quantities. It can be very overwhelming for a child to see an entire apple on their plate, but an apple slice seems more manageable. Serve a little more each time depending on how your child likes the new food.

Involve Your Kids.

This is the most successful method for dealing with picky eaters in my home. Create an interest in new food by involving your kids in meal planning, preparation and serving. Children are much more likely to eat what they have made because they had a part in the process.

A few simple ways to involve your children in meal preparation, planning, and serving.

1. Plant a small garden. You don't need ANY yard space to do this. Tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, lettuce, and herbs are just a few things that grow very well in pots. If you have a deck, back porch, driveway, or yard you can plant a small garden. Your children will love watching the plants grow and it is a great science lesson too!

2. Take your children to a [pick-your-own farm](#). If you absolutely cannot grow a thing in your yard, your children can still participate by visiting a farm and choosing some of your produce. It isn't quite the same as growing your own, but it gets the kids involved.
3. Let them assist in meal planning. When I make my weekly menu I ask my children what they would like to eat that week. I try to make sure that two of our meals are meals they chose. I don't just ask them to pick the main dish, I ask them to come up with sides too. When they are little I help them figure out what goes well together, but we have had some strange combinations in the past.
4. Let them assist in meal preparation. My two little girls love to mix, measure, and pour. Depending on their age, your child can take ownership of the meal by helping prepare it. My six-year-old loves to grate cheese, and my four-year old loves to crack eggs. You should see the smiles on their faces when I proudly announce that they have helped prepare dinner as we sit down to eat. As they get older, they can take over meal preparation all together. My oldest two children are responsible for planning and preparing several meals a week.
5. Take them to the grocery store. Often times I overlook fruits and vegetables that aren't my favorite, or ones I don't know how to prepare. Taking the kids to the store always means adding a few new food items to the cart from the produce section that they would like to try. Most kids are more willing to try it if they picked it out themselves.

Get Creative.

I mentioned earlier that I am not one to cut food into fancy shapes just so my child will eat it. I am however, willing to experiment with new ways of serving food so my kids are encouraged to try it.

Here are a few ideas to encourage your kids to try new things.

- **Peanut Butter and Ranch Dressing.**

Not together of course, but I have a few children who love peanut butter, so I add it to foods like apples and celery and they gobble them up. The same goes for ranch dressing. If there are sauces your child likes, try using them on new foods. I have one child who hates stir fry, but he will eat it with ranch dressing.

- **Bite sized servings.**

As I mentioned before, big portions can intimidate kids. Apple slices, cheese cubes, baby carrots, and other kid sized servings might entice your child to try something new.

- **Raw vs. Cooked.**

It might be that your child doesn't like the taste of something cold, but will eat it warm or vice versa. Try fresh broccoli instead of steamed, warm applesauce instead of cold from the fridge, cooked pears instead of slices. As adults we have preferences too, so trying the same food prepared a different way might do the trick.

- **Use seasonings.**

Why do people think that kid food needs to be tasteless and bland? My kids love garlic so I use it on everything! Sometimes kids want to eat food that actually has a little flavor. Experiment with different seasonings and find out what your children like.

- **Pay your kids to try new foods.**

A few summers ago I found myself surrounded by an army of picky eaters. It was so bad I didn't know what I was going to do. It seemed like the only foods they wanted to eat were pizza and apple slices. I decided to do something drastic and pay my kids to try new foods.

I created a food [check-off chart](#) to help keep track of the new foods my children tried. For each new food they tried they received a dime. The younger kids loved having a way to earn money, and all of my kids realized there were foods they thought they disliked, but in fact they really did enjoy them.

Other Helpful Tips

Hide the Kid's Menus!

Have you noticed that most restaurants have a kid's menu and an adult menu? The kid's menu is usually loaded with junk! Macaroni and cheese, nuggets, corn dogs, and other choices completely void of nutritional value are usually standard kid's menu fare.

If you are struggling with a picky eater, stay away from the kid's menu and allow them order off the adult menu. My children often split an adult meal with each other or with me. It is usually cheaper and they eat much healthier. If this is a real struggle, stop eating out until your kids are over their picky-ness.

Make Sure You Serve One Thing They Love.

You catch more flies with honey, right? When I make a meal that I know one child truly dislikes I try to make a side they enjoy. They still need to try the main dish, but they can fill up on a healthy side.

Watch the Snacking.

I cannot count the number of times I have been at the park with friends and watched their children eat a pound of snack food while their mother tells me their child won't eat a thing for lunch. They won't eat because they aren't hungry!

If your child is use to snacking throughout the day, they probably aren't hungry enough to try new foods at mealtimes. Considering replacing nutritionally void

snack foods with fruits, vegetables, cheese, nuts, and whole grains. Or, try cutting out snacking all together to see if your hungrier child will try new foods at meal times.

Get rid of the junk!

If you or your child is really struggling in this area, get rid of all the junk food in your home. I noticed that after I stopped buying a lot of processed food my kids stopped asking for it. If healthy foods are the only option, eventually they will eat it.

Give them a choice.

Choice is good, if you let them choose between two healthy options. Kids like to feel empowered, so empower them with good choices. They can't go wrong when choosing between cheese and yogurt, apples and bananas, or trail mix and whole grain toast.

They Just Won't Eat!!!!

What if your child refuses to eat? I am not one for a battle of the wills with my kids. In our house, if you don't eat what is on your plate you don't get seconds of anything else on the table. There is no arguing or debating. I know my children will not starve to death if they refuse to eat one meal. This situation usually occurs during dinner, so I make sure that if the child is refusing to eat, the next morning's breakfast will not be their favorite. Eventually they realize they need to eat at each meal and not wait for something better to come along.

If the child chooses to throw a tantrum over food they are sent to their room. They must sit on their bed until they can behave in an appropriate way during dinner. If a toddler throws a fit, they are put in their crib or their high chair is turned to face the wall until they calm down.

Remember, the habits your children form when they are young will be with them their whole lives. Teaching them to love healthy, delicious foods and make good choices will benefit them in a variety of ways. Meal time does not need to be war-time. Developing good habits, starting young, and including your children in the kitchen can turn dinner disasters into family fun.

For delicious, low cost, family friendly recipes visit TheHappyHousewife.com.

Resources

[The \\$5 Dinner Mom Breakfast and Lunch Cookbook: 200 Recipes for Quick, Delicious, and Nourishing Meals That Are Easy on the Budget and a Snap to Prepare](#)

My friend Erin has perfected the healthy, inexpensive meal. In her latest cookbook she shares over 200 recipes for breakfast and lunch. If you are looking for healthy recipes that are budget and kid friendly check out this cookbook.

[SuperFoods Rx: Fourteen Foods That Will Change Your Life](#)

If you don't know where to start when it comes to eating healthy, check out SuperFoods Rx. This book is a great resource that lists the fourteen healthiest foods you can eat. If you are looking to add healthy foods to your diet start with this book.

[Melissa's Great Book of Produce: Everything You Need to Know about Fresh Fruits and Vegetables](#)

This is one of my favorite books! If you want to learn more about fruits and vegetables, but don't know how to pick the best ones at the market or how to prepare them this book is full of answers. It is more of an encyclopedia than a cookbook, but is an amazing resource and I highly recommend.

[Deceptively Delicious: Simple Secrets to Get Your Kids Eating Good Food](#)

This book by Jessica Seinfeld teaches you how to add healthy foods to your children's favorite meals. Whether it's pureed spinach to brownies or squash in the macaroni and cheese, Jessica has thought of it all. While I think your kids need to learn how to eat healthy foods without the sneaking, sometimes you gotta do, what you gotta do!