

11 TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS & PICKY EATERS

TIPS TO HELP MAKE THE HOLIDAYS EASIER FOR YOU & YOUR CHILD



Food refusal, texture problems, picky eating, chewing troubles, fine motor difficulties. These are all common obstacles that parents face when it comes to getting their kids to eat. The holidays are a wonderful time for family, friends, and food, but it can also be a busy and stressful time. Having a picky eater can add to that stress, especially when many gatherings are centered around meals and eating together. Here are 11 tips for picky eaters to help your child become a well-rounded eater and, most importantly, eat the variety of nutritious food that their growing bodies need.

1. INTRODUCE A VARIETY OF FOODS EARLY AND OFTEN

Being a good eater starts at infancy. Children are not born with the automatic ability to eat all foods. Just like any other skill, it is a learned process. Opening up your child's palate to a wide variety of textures and tastes from their very first bites of food is crucial to helping them process a variety of foods and, ultimately, eat and enjoy them. Of course, always consult your pediatrician on when to introduce foods. You may be surprised at how early many will say is OK to start puree or soft solids.

2. GET OVER THE MESS AND LET THEM PLAY WITH THEIR FOOD

This is hard and I understand the urge to keep your child clean and your floor mess-free. Children learn by DOING. Allowing them to play with their food, experience it, and be curious about it can help them learn what to do with it! When babies first start to pick up food, try to avoid always feeding them yourself. Their fine motor skills are developing. Part of the eating process is getting the food to their mouths. Let them experiment with that skill. It helps with their motor planning and coordination.

3. CHANGE THE TEXTURE

Are there foods that you can't stomach because of how they feel? Some people gag when eating yogurt because it's slimy. Others can't stand the texture of bananas because they are mushy. One of the best tips for picky eaters who you notice have a problem with texture, is to try changing the texture of the food you are feeding them. Put granola with banana. Toast bread so it has crunch. Try cooked and raw veggies or dried fruit and freeze-dried vegetables.

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4. CHANGE THE TEMPERATURE

Sometimes a simple temperature change can make a big difference in the array of foods your child will eat. Offer your child frozen vs. refrigerated berries, like raspberries or blackberries. If you are serving something warm, let a food cool down a bit more than you usually do before you serve it. Sometimes children will get turned off by food if it is served too hot and they have to wait for it to cool down. That may sound too easy, but sometimes it's as simple as that.

5. CHANGE THE TASTE

You can try changing the taste of non-preferred food items. One easy way to change the taste is with dips and spreads. We use a variety of dipping sauces and spreads in our feeding therapy to alter the taste. Some of our favorites are: Nutella, peanut butter, ranch dip, avocado dip, whipped cream, cheese spreads, ketchup or mustard. The options for dips are endless. Yogurt is great for getting children to eat fruit. They love to dip!

6. CHANGE HOW IT LOOKS

Chopping large fruits and vegetables into smaller pieces can help to eat them seem less overwhelming. Start with just a few bites and give lots of praise for even one taste! Change the color (try several different kinds of apples or purple potatoes), add avocado to other purees to give it a green tint or try strawberry applesauce because maybe pink food is more fun to eat than yellow food!

7. USE BEHAVIOR STRATEGIES

Food refusal is a behavior. The reason for that behavior will vary based on the individual child. Some strategies you can try are "first/then" plates or verbiage. "First eat this, then you can have this." These things are simple and often effective.

8. INCLUDE THEM IN THE PROCESS

Children are more likely to eat the food if they are a part of the preparation process. Allow them to help you! That goes for something as simple as eating an orange. Have them wash it, peel it (all the while asking them questions such as "What does it feel like?" "What does it smell like?"), cut it, put it on the plate and arrange it in a fun pattern practice.

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9. MAKE IT FUN

Mealtime needs to be an ENJOYABLE experience. If a child is not enjoying mealtime or eating in general, it is going to be a big struggle. Eating should be a positive experience and there is no reason why it can't be fun. Use fun colored plates and utensils, make a big deal about everyone sitting down at the table and eating together. Tell jokes and stories, laugh, and HAVE A GOOD TIME.

10. CUT BACK ON SUGARS

If your child has regular access to foods like candy and soda, your chances of getting them to eat foods that are not full of processed sugars decreases. Their palates become used to whatever they eat on a regular basis. A good tip to go by is "everything in moderation" (and even less when it comes to sugar)!

11. STAY VIGILANT AND DON'T GIVE UP!

It's hard. It can be exhausting. Eating isn't always fun for a picky eater either. At some point you just want your child to eat without putting up a fuss or throwing a tantrum. However, patience and consistency are key.

UTILIZING THESE TIPS FOR PICKY EATERS

While these tips for picky eaters can be helpful strategies for difficult eaters, some children need professional help to overcome feeding obstacles. If you are concerned about your child's ability to chew and swallow food safely, if their poor eating habits are causing weight loss or a very apparent lack of proper nutrition, or if you are just out of ideas on how to help your picky eater, seek help. Consult your pediatrician and find a speech-language pathologist who provides feeding and swallowing therapy. We can help! Connect with your SLP or OT if you have any questions!

Information by: Natalie Erling M.A., CCC-SLP