

Picky Eaters



This is an exciting time in your toddler's life. He or she is constantly exploring the world and learning new activities. Your toddler is becoming more talkative and expressive, while gaining the ability to ask for and demand the things he or she wants. Essentially, your toddler is beginning to gain a sense of independence and separateness from you.

Though this is exciting, it can be filled with frustration when your decisions and your desires are not the same as those of your toddler. Some of the most difficult situations may arise at meal and snack times when your toddler may refuse to eat or prefer to play rather than sitting at the table. These situations may seem unmanageable to you as a parent, but by understanding the reasons why picky eating occurs, you can begin to implement simple strategies to improve your child's eating behaviours.

Although it is frustrating that a child may be very picky with what they eat, it is also important to remember that toddlers are no longer in a period of rapid growth as they were during the first two years of life, during which time the child is expected to quadruple his or her birth weight. Toddler's nutritional requirements decrease; their appetites decline, and their feeding patterns may become unpredictable. Please understand that it is unrealistic to expect a toddler to eat a large amount of food at each meal every day. After all, a toddler's stomach is approximately the same size as his or her clenched fist.

What Do We Know about Picky Eating?

- ◇ A toddler is not growing as rapidly as he or she did in the first year of life. Therefore, a toddler may have a decrease in appetite resulting in decreased consumption of food. This will generally be reflected in a decrease in eating at meals and snack times.
- ◇ Young children possess an automatic mechanism that helps them regulate how much they ingest so they can sustain growth. In other words, when left to their own devices, a toddler will eat enough to give his or her body what it needs to grow.
- ◇ The introduction of new foods to a toddler can be a scary experience. We, as adults, know that it may take several tries to become comfortable with a new experience. Young children are no different when it comes to trying new foods. Toddlers may require frequent exposures to a new item before they will accept it.
- ◇ A toddler is just beginning to recognize himself or herself as a separate person from the parent and is struggling to gain some independence and control over the environment. He or she may attempt to gain this independence and control by testing the limits imposed by the parent, especially during mealtimes.
- ◇ Toddlers' eating patterns are influenced by the eating behaviours of their parents, siblings, and peers. The popular phrase, "children have a mind of their own," does not always hold true for the dietary decisions made by a toddler. The way you eat and the food choices you make will affect the choices your toddler makes.

Strategies to Make Meals and Snack Times More Enjoyable For You and Your Toddler

- ◆ Offer your toddler 2-3 food choices at snacks or meals. This allows your child to have some control over his or her eating patterns by choosing what to eat.
- ◆ Provide your toddler with appropriate smaller servings of foods so he or she does not feel overwhelmed. This may be a couple of tablespoons of vegetables or meat, or a half of a piece of fruit. Toddlers feel a sense of independence when they can finish all their food and ask for more.
- ◆ Give your toddler the appropriate equipment for eating. In other words, provide them with small utensils, plastic cups, and plates with a lip to allow food to be more easily scooped. Do not forget to seat your toddler in a position that allows him or her to reach everything easily and independently. Position your toddler's feet so they are supported and not dangling.
- ◆ Allow your toddler to develop his or her own tastes at his or her own pace. It may take ten or more exposures to a new food before a toddler will accept it. Be patient with this process.
- ◆ Your toddler will develop personal favourite foods. Make these foods occasionally, but resist the urge to make them all the time. Preparing your toddler's favourite meal all the time will encourage those picky eating habits and may lead to the avoidance of entire groups of foods.
- ◆ Schedule meals and snacks for approximately the same time each day. Toddlers need a routine and they should be expected to be cooperative with that schedule.
- ◆ Do not eliminate snacks between meals with the expectation that the toddler will eat more at the next meal. Toddlers do not understand the physical discomfort of hunger pains and may become irritable if snacks are eliminated.
- ◆ Make mealtimes family times. Eat at the table together and expect your toddler to sit with the family whether or not he or she is interested in eating. Research has demonstrated that eating dinner as a family has beneficial effects on diet quality and food choices later in life.
- ◆ Turn off the television and put away the games at mealtime. The toddler needs to have undivided attention for the task of eating and will tend to be more cooperative with sitting at the table if not distracted.
- ◆ Do not force your toddler to eat by punishing or threatening him or her. Your toddler is trying to assert his or his independence by testing the limits you have provided. Punishing the child or threatening to punish the child will only result in a power struggle that will worsen the picky eating habits.
- ◆ Give your toddler juice or milk as a part of meals and snacks. Offer him or her water in between these times. Toddlers require no more than 450-750 mL of milk a day and should be limited to no more than 120-180 mL of juice per day. Allowing a child to fill up on juice and milk throughout the day will cause a decrease in appetite, so the child may eat even less at meal times.

Keep Trying

Over 50% of parents of fussy eaters give up after 2-3 offerings of a new food if it had not been accepted. Scientific research suggests that it may take 8-10 offerings before a new food is accepted. A child cannot learn to accept a new item without frequent exposure. Studies have shown that a lack of offering of specific foods to a young child as the most limiting factor in the development of food choices. So keep up the effort!!

Mix it up

Serve some favourite and some not-so-favourite foods at each meal. Encourage a taste, but don't force the issue.

Praise the Positives

Rather than show displeasure at the negatives.

Don't Jump in With Alternatives

The next meal or snack isn't that far away.

Get Your Kids to Help With Food Preparation

Getting kids to help in the kitchen encourages them to try the final "product". Also ask them for input into preparation of the meal, you may be surprised what healthy alternatives they may come up with.

Encourage Independence

Get children to prepare their own snacks, lunches, with an emphasis on healthy choices.