

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

For parents of picky eaters, mealtimes often become an unpleasant battle of wills. Small children typically refuse to eat some of their meals or will announce that they are done after taking only a few bites of food. Most adults find this behavior exasperating especially if they were brought up in an era where you were expected to “clean your plate”. Parents also fear that their children will become mal-nourished if they are picky eaters. Many parents are under the misconception that small children need to consume three square meals per day and significant quantities of food at each meal. They naturally become stressed out when kids fail to cooperate and eat only a few morsels.

Well, there’s good news! Research has shown that if small children are provided with a variety of healthy food choices, they will eventually eat a balanced diet over time. In addition, parents should keep serving their children different foods even if they refuse to try them initially. According to a study conducted by the University of Illinois, children need to be exposed to a new food ten times before they are likely to try it!!

Picky eating is actually normal behavior for children that are in the one to five year age group. Dr. William G. Wilkoff, author of Coping with a Picky Eater, maintains that small children tend to eat only about one and a half meals per day. They also eat more at breakfast and lunchtime and are done with any significant eating by dinnertime. Therefore, what parents perceive as picky eating is typical behavior.

Dr. Wilkoff’s book lists some excellent guidelines for dealing with picky eaters. Suggested rules for parents and children are as follows:

Parents:

1. **EATING IS NOT TO BE DISCUSSED AT OR NEAR MEALTIME.** You should not beg your children to eat more or offer bribes (desert) as a reward for eating. Discussions about their eating habits should also be conducted when they are out of earshot.
2. **MEALTIME CONVERSATION SHOULD BE POSITIVE.** Try not to bring up unpleasant subjects or argue with your children at mealtime. You could ask them to tell you about their day or tell them about yours.
3. **LIMIT MEALS TO TWENTY MINUTES IN LENGTH.** Do not force a child to stay seated until they have cleaned their plate. Picky eaters should be allowed to leave the table after twenty minutes even if they have only eaten a few bites.
4. **STICK TO THE PLANNED MENU.** You should serve only one meal and not make extra meals for children such as grilled cheese because they are guaranteed to eat it. Providing kids with their favorite foods on a daily basis only reinforces picky eating since they lack any motivation to try new foods.
5. **FOLLOW THE SAME SNACKING RULES YOU HAVE MADE FOR YOUR CHILD.** Parents need to set an example and eat healthy snack food in front of their children, preferably during scheduled snack times.
6. **SERVE APPROPRIATELY SIZED PORTIONS OF BOTH FAVORED AND UNFAVORED FOODS.** Don’t serve overly large portions of unfavored foods or new foods since it’s unlikely that your child will try them. However, serving larger portions of a favored food is acceptable as long as it’s an item on the planned menu.

Children:

1. **ALL EATING AND DRINKING SHOULD BE DONE AT THE TABLE.** Limiting children to the table for meals and snacks will help remind them that eating is to be done at a certain time and place. This rule can also help parents avoid uncontrolled snacking.
2. **LIMIT THE NUMBER OF DRINKS.** Children should be given only one four-ounce cup of milk or juice during meals since too many drinks can decrease their appetite for food. Give them water if they claim they are still thirsty.
3. **PROVIDE NO MORE THAN TWO SNACKS PER DAY.** You can offer a mid-morning and mid-afternoon nutritious snack at a scheduled time. Snacks should not be given close to mealtimes since they could interfere with your child’s appetite.

4. NO SECONDS UNLESS HE OR SHE HAS CLEANED THEIR PLATE. This rule will help prevent your child from filling up on only one type of food at meals. The un-favored food must be eaten before second helpings of the favored food is given.
5. CHILDREN SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE TABLE WHEN DONE EATING. Once a child reaches age three, they should ask to be excused when they have completed their dinner. Meals should also be eaten at one sitting and children should not be permitted to get up and down from the table at their whim.
6. BEHAVIOR IN THE DINING AREA SHOULD NOT BE DISRUPTIVE. If your child finishes eating before the rest of the family, he or she should play quietly if they wish to remain in the dining area. Bothering other family members while they are trying to eat should not be tolerated. Failure to comply with this rule could be handled with a time-out.

In summary, parents need to develop a more casual attitude towards their children's eating habits and focus on enjoying meals instead. Pushing kids to eat may only increase the chances of them being picky according to family therapist, Dr. Jerry Wyckoff. Non-eating can become a game to get a reaction out of parents and may give children a feeling of power over them. Parents must remain calm when their children don't eat in order to avoid giving them any negative attention.

If your child's weight and height are within normal parameters of the standard growth chart, then you can allow yourself to relax about their picky eating habits. You have done your job as a parent if you provide your family with a healthy meal whether or not they choose to eat it every time. Your kids may actually surprise you by eating *more* once the pressure is off.

Sources:

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