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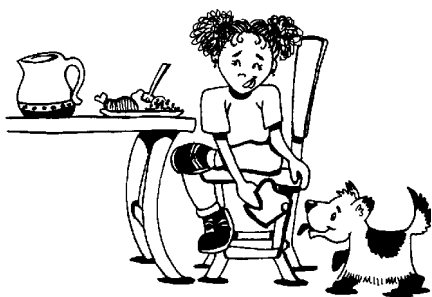
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Fact Sheet 1096

There's A Picky Eater At Home¹

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Children need specific nutrients such as calcium, vitamin A, and iron for adequate growth. Parents all around the country know that they need to offer a variety of foods to their children. But what is a parent to do with a picky eater? As a parent, you may not believe it now, but your child probably won't always be a picky eater. Strange or difficult eating habits are often just phases that pass with time.



It's normal for a child's appetite to vary from day to day. Children's bodies tell them how much to eat. They usually eat only when they're hungry and stop when they're full. Hard as it is, it's OK for your child to skip a meal once in a while.

He will ask for food when his stomach is empty. In setting the stage for positive mealtime, consider these three factors:

- Environment. Turn off the TV and any other distractions. Provide a firm, comfortable table and chair. Kids should not have to strain to reach their food.
- Be aware of child-size food portions. Children have smaller stomachs and need to eat smaller portions of food frequently throughout the day. As a general rule, serve one tablespoon of each food per year of life.
- Respect food preferences. Children, like any individuals, have food likes and dislikes. Be aware of the foods your child will not eat. Instead of forcing foods or ignoring the issue, look for food substitutes he's more likely to eat. For example, if your child does not like milk, try cheese and yogurt for his source of calcium.

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Feeding responsibilities

It is important to have clear the division of feeding responsibilities among parents and children.

Parents and care givers have the responsibility of offering nutritious foods. Children are responsible for deciding what to eat from those food choices presented by the parent and how much to eat.

Here are four important feeding jobs for parents:

- Buy healthful foods.
- Serve regular meals and snacks.
- Make mealtimes pleasant.
- Set a good example.

New foods

Many times children will rely only on favorite foods that they feel comfortable eating. They may refuse to try new foods. Children, picky eaters included, need to expand their food choices, and this can be accomplished gradually.

- Offer a new food together with a favorite food.
- Bring new foods in slowly, one at a time.
- Offer new foods at the beginning of the meal because that's when children are most hungry.
- Arrange them nicely on the plate so they are appealing to the child.
- Serve small portions the first few times - it is less intimidating than a full plate.
- Encourage children to taste at least one bite, but do not force them.

A child should not be bribed to try new foods or even to eat a meal. Offering him a dessert if he tries the new food sends the message that dessert is more important than

the food. Parents need to promote the social aspect of mealtime and positive eating behaviors.

Tips for getting your child to eat better . . .

- Serve foods that appeal to kids. Include a variety of colors, textures, and forms.
 - combination of colors makes meals attractive.
 - offer meals that combine foods that are crunchy or crispy and foods that are soft.
 - cut foods in interesting shapes.
- Offer plain, unmixed foods. Some children prefer to eat foods separately instead of all together in a dish.
- Encourage children to practice serving themselves. They can try pouring water or milk, spreading peanut butter on bread, or spooning food from a serving bowl to their plate.
- Give kids enough time to eat. They are less skilled at eating by themselves.
- Involve your child in food shopping and preparation. Children are more willing to try foods they helped prepare.
- Allow hot foods to cool down and cold foods to warm up before offering it to your child.
- Make eating and family time the focus of mealtime. This is a good opportunity for the family to talk about the highlights of the day or future plans for family activities. Make mealtime conversation pleasant.