

Nutrition-Ten Tips for Picky Eaters

By Maxine Sprague

When I was growing up, I would hear people say, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." That saying reminds me of children's eating habits. You can slave for hours in the kitchen, use your finest place settings, even dine by candlelight but if your child isn't hungry or doesn't like the cuisine, you can't, using reasonable methods, make them eat it.

There are some things you can do to increase the possibility that they will eat what you serve.

Offer a wide variety of nutritious food and look at the bigger picture.

Children's eating can be very unpredictable and fluctuate sporadically. They love something one day and hate it the next. They'll be just starving one minute and not hungry a few minutes later. Serving a wide variety of food and gently encouraging them to eat a balance at every meal will eliminate many mealtime battles. Looking at the bigger picture helps you see that the balance might not come all in one day but generally averages out over several days.

Don't force children to eat.

Making food an item of contention between you and your child will leave you on the losing end of the battle. Just how do you force a child to swallow something he doesn't want to? "Open wide for the little birdie" and "Choo, choo, choo, let the train in the tunnel" just don't cut it after the first few months of eating. Children are very adept at finding creative solutions to avoid the dreaded items; hiding them in cheeks, pockets or on a sibling's plate, feeding the pet under the table and threatening to throw up. Now, that's one threat I'd rather not challenge. Put yourself in their position. Would you enjoy someone forcing you to eat something you absolutely detest? It's not a pleasant situation to be in as you may recall from your own childhood.

Telling children stories of starving children may just be enough motivation to set their minds whirling on creative ways to deliver the string beans and brussel sprouts to those hungry, starving children. Children need to be taught to be thankful they have plenty to eat and to be compassionate and share with others who don't but this information should not be a bargaining chip for mealtime negotiations.

Make mealtime a positive experience.

Eating is not a competitive event with food as the reward. Setting dessert up as the prize for eating the rest of the meal elevates high fat, overly sweet food to a position of unearned importance, creating habits of overeating and craving for unhealthy foods. Keeping positive and negative pressure to a minimum where food is involved makes for a relaxed eating atmosphere. Keep informed about your child's lunch room atmosphere at school. A stressful school lunch time can seriously affect a child's ability to function well at school.

Teach children to view food as nourishment for active, healthy bodies.

Educate your child through reading books and discussing how their bodies work. Understanding why their bodies need fuel and what foods provide them with the best fuel will help them make wiser food choices.

Stock up on nutrient rich foods.

The foods you have readily available in your home will influence your children's diet and eating style. Keep moderation and variety in mind when you stock your food shelves.

Involve your children in the planning, shopping, growing and preparation of food.

Encouraging your child to make decisions about what to serve and how to eat encourages independent thinking skills and responsible decision making. The skills involved in food preparation will be useful for a lifetime. Teaching them to take small portions and add a little more if they are still hungry helps prevent food wasting.

Offer healthy between meal snacks for days when they're absolutely famished and couldn't possibly wait until the next meal.

Be aware of other influences such as peer pressure and advertising.

Foods that are totally yuck one week may be just the coolest next. Food should not be in your Top 10 List of Peer Issues that are worth arguing about. Save your breath for more critical peer problems. Educating children about the powerful medium of advertising at a very young age will help them make wiser decisions and become more immune to its influence.

Set a positive example.

Abraham Lincoln is credited with saying that "the only way to bring up a child in the way he should go, is to travel that way yourself". Forcing your child to finish that one last bite encourages poor eating habits. Look at it this way, the bite is gone whether it travels your child's digestive tract or makes an early exit to the compost bucket. It is more harmful to encourage overeating than to feed your compost pile. Eat when you're hungry, quit when you're full is good advice.

Serve food children enjoy.

Foods come in a variety of textures, temperatures, flavors and combinations. Children are unique individuals and some are more sensitive to these variations in foods while others will eat almost anything. With the wide variety of foods available, there are many choices that will satisfy both nutrition and taste. Be sensitive to your child, serve foods they enjoy along with foods that you encourage them to experience.

In conclusion, keeping your child's likes and dislikes in mind, serving child-size portions and encouraging them to sample new foods will help create a positive attitude toward food and eating. A significant portion of our lives revolves around food; planning,

growing, shopping, preparing, serving, eating and cleaning up afterwards. To make healthy eating a positive experience for our families is a gift that will bring shared pleasure and endure for a lifetime.

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