

# THE PICKY EATER SOLUTION

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## Introduction

*“Pull up a chair. Take a taste. Come join us. Life is so endlessly delicious.”*

— [Ruth Reichl](#)

Artfully placed on your toddler’s favorite plate is a portion of homemade macaroni and cheese, sliced turkey hot dogs, finger-sized carrots, and a handful of freshly steamed green beans. “Enjoy, Sweetie!” you sing out, secretly hoping tonight will be different. But like every other meal time, you end up begging your child to eat something ... *anything*.

If this scene seems familiar you’re likely the parent of a picky eater, and not only worried whether your child is getting adequate nutrition, but also hurt because your loving efforts are rejected. It may help ease your heart and mind to know you’re not alone. There are millions of American households playing out similar dining dramas.

In fact, according to research, up to fifty percent of 18- to 24-month olds are described as picky eaters by their mothers, and twenty-five percent of all children demonstrate some picky eating behavior. What’s more, a recent survey reveals over half of parents with picky eaters say their biggest daily challenge is to ensure their child eats healthy and nutritious meals. Twenty-five percent of these worried parents make a completely different meal at dinner time for their cuisine-discriminating kids.

Although eating issues will frequently resolve by the time a child is six or seven years old, there’s no guarantee. Finicky food choices can linger in children of *all* ages from infants and toddlers to school age children and adolescents. (FYI: Plenty of adults also admit to being picky eaters.) That’s probably because there isn’t one simple cause for food discrimination.

As a physician specializing in Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition, Clinical Director of the Food Allergy Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, and an Assistant Clinical Professor in Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, I have treated thousands of children with food issues. I can assure you there are several possible reasons why your child is fighting over food. Picky eating can be developmental, behavioral, psychological, the result of food intolerance or other medical conditions, or a combination of any of these possibilities.

And there are ways to deal with each of these issues. That’s why I’ve written *The Picky Eater Solution*, to help parents identify the cause of their child’s eating problem and to offer specific, practical and scientifically based solutions to help overcome the challenge.

Inside *The Picky Eater Solution*, you’ll find the stories of frustrated parents, narratives of their children’s eating difficulties, descriptions of the causes and the science behind it, and step-by-step strategies to help manage eating problems and bring pleasure to mealtimes. There’s also a resource section for further information.

Once you get the inside scoop on what’s behind your child’s picky eating and put solutions into practice, you may be able to reduce, or even eliminate eating issues.

Bon Appetit.

## Chapter 1: What Makes a Picky Eater?

Wouldn't life be simple if there was only one reason why our kids are turning their noses up at food? Well, as we all know by now when it comes to raising children, the road has endless twists and turns and the one leading to the high chair or dining table is no exception. In fact, researchers have spent decades studying the reasons why some children are picky eaters while others have minor issues or are true blue gourmets.

So before we look into the different types of finicky eating patterns and scientifically based strategies that can help put an end to them, let's investigate some of the issues that may be contributing to your child's persnickety eating behavior.

As we explore possibilities, always keep in mind that you are the ultimate judge when it comes to your kids. You've seen them in action, know their desires and reactions, have witnessed their growth and setbacks, understand where they are in their stage of development and can appreciate their individual temperaments. You know whether they are adventurous or reticent, willful or easy-going, distractible or focused, if they are robust and energetic or sensitive and more susceptible to common ailments like allergies or upset stomachs.

Although there is evidence of a strong genetic influence on appetite traits in children, in a study reported in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, researchers found the home environment plays an important role in modeling children's eating behaviors. For example, overcontrol, restrictiveness, pressure to eat, and promises of reward have a negative effect on a child's food acceptance. On the other hand, parents' food preferences and eating behaviors can also provide an opportunity to model good eating habits.

### Your Relationship with Food

The first clue to your child's eating issues, and often not the most emotionally comfortable to consider, are your own feelings about food: how they influenced your childhood, how they affect your present eating preferences, and how they may be contributing to the way you approach your child's food habits.

When Margaret brought her two-year old son, Jake, to my office she was understandably worried that his recent routine of restrictive eating for days and then eating voraciously on other days was hurting his health. If Jake refused food she felt like a failure as a mother and was quick to blame herself. When he ate with abandon she was concerned he was overdoing it. Hearing the alarm in her voice, I asked Margaret to tell me what her childhood relationship to food was like. She remembered it vividly:

All the happy times in our family centered on food. We celebrated with giant casseroles and heaps of chicken and meat piled high on platters, enough to feed an army. If I did something my mom was proud of, she rewarded me with my favorite foods. Now as an adult, I believe I use food to make myself feel better. I also worry about my weight, so I'm always dieting. When Jake turns his nose up at what I prepare, I feel totally dejected – and I think he must hate me and I hate myself. Of course, I also worry that his yo-yo eating is unhealthy and he's going to end up chunky like me.

It's not surprising parents who have a difficult time with their own eating behavior may be anxious about their child's relationship with food.

Do *you* avoid veggies? Don't fool yourself into thinking your kids aren't perceptive enough to pick up on it. A recent study found that two- and three-year-old children's food preferences are significantly related to foods that their mothers liked, disliked, and never tasted.

### Your Child's Development Stage

*Get my toddler to sit still for a meal? You must be joking!*

As a general rule when kids grow quickly, their bodies need a lot of calories, and they're likely to eat a wider variety of foods and be more experimental with choices. On the other hand, when the growth pace slackens, the requirement for calories lessens and children will likely be drawn only to those foods they prefer, or they may eat less, or totally reject foods that aren't their favorites. Knowing when your child's growth is rapid and when it slows down, can help you predict and understand their pickiness.

Does this sound familiar?

*My two and half year old will only drink milk. Every once in a while he will eat chicken nuggets, but he eats no other foods.*

According to a study cited in the journal *Appetite*, on-the-go toddlers around their second or third year are more apt to develop picky eating habits. Kids who lustily tried new foods between nine to eighteen months may suddenly be much less interested in food and more interested in exploring their environment. Simply put: They can't be bothered to eat!

Other developmental milestones which can affect a child's relationship to food include:

- Between the ages of three to five – Toddlers and preschoolers are particularly picky in this stage, especially if you compare their appetites to the previous eighteen months. At this time, children's growth not only slows down but psychologically and emotionally they want to separate even more; this desire is commonly played out at meal times. Every food exchange can feel like a negotiation. They may just refuse to eat whatever you prepare.
- Between the ages of five to seven – Children may engage in push-pull behaviors, striving to exert their independence. What they loved to eat in the past, whether beloved chicken nuggets or peanut butter sandwiches, may suddenly trigger a thumbs down.
- Between the ages of seven and nine – Body consciousness begins to develop. It's not uncommon in our culture for kids to experiment with dieting at this stage.

### **Your Child's Temperament**

Some children develop reactions to foods based on predetermined ways of interacting with their environment. One common temperamental characteristic that affects picky eating is called the "threshold of responsiveness." It means your child is so sensitively tuned into the world he'll notice even small differences. Kids with a low threshold of responsiveness can be turned off when a favorite food is made slightly differently, if the food isn't the "right" temperature, or if one food is touching another.

*It doesn't seem to matter what I put on my son's plate. If it's not plain noodles he won't eat it.*

Kids with low threshold responsiveness are more likely to be "white food fanciers" and insist on eating only bland foods that are white or beige like pasta. Not surprisingly, their diet is heavy on carbohydrates. Green vegetables are usually off limits which can drive nutrition-conscious parents especially crazy. Keep in mind, as children get older, most raise their threshold.

In general, young kids have a kind of general neophobia, or avoidance of the unfamiliar. Texture, smell and taste all enter into the equation. A natural skepticism of new foods is actually a healthy approach for children. It's probably nature's way of protecting a child by keeping her from eating something that might be dangerous like poisonous berries or mushrooms.

### **Your Child's Genes**

I was a picky eater when I was a kid and I'm choosey today. That's why I "get it" when my little one won't even taste certain foods.

Some kids also have a genetically-based predisposition to avoid new foods. A recent study examined the possibility that reluctance to eat new foods is genetically determined. The study led by Dr. Lucy Cooke of the department of epidemiology and public health at the University College London and published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* concluded that 78 percent of the condition is due to genetics and the other 22 percent is environmentally related.

In another study, Myles Faith, PhD and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, evaluated the eating patterns of 792 twins aged 7 years old. The researchers found that genetics mostly dictates a child's picky palate and cravings for particular foods.

DNA also accounts for why some kids can enjoy broccoli and brussel sprouts while others would rather eat mud than something green. Biologists discovered that out of the thousands of genes in our DNA, there's only one that determines if we like the taste of some healthy greens or if we can't stand them.

Although it's helpful for parents to be aware of inherited factors, it doesn't mean there aren't effective strategies to counter-act your child's biologically based tendencies – or at least figure out a “sneaky” way to get greens into their diet.

REMEMBER: BIOLOGY IS NOT DESTINY.

### **Your Child and Food Allergies**

It's estimated that up to 12 million Americans have food allergies of one type or another. If your child repeatedly nixes a particular food, it might be the sign of hidden food sensitivity. Young children don't have the reasoning skills to make the connection between tummy upset and the food on their plate. They may be turning up their nose at string beans only because it's always served with melted butter and the child is lactose intolerant.

These are common childhood food sensitivities:

- Fruit – There is a type of food allergy called [Oral Allergy Syndrome](#). In some people with pollen allergies, eating raw fruit can cause them to have a skin reaction around and inside their mouths. Some children will describe the mouth as feeling “fuzzy” or “spicy” after eating fruit that causes a reaction.
- Milk or Dairy Products – An aversion to milk may be due to its taste, or it may be a sign of [lactose intolerance](#), in which your body lacks the enzymes necessary to digest the sugar in milk.
- Bread, Pasta, or Baked Goods – [Celiac Disease](#) is an autoimmune disorder in which the body cannot process gluten (a protein in wheat and other grains). Celiac symptoms can also be delayed, making it difficult to figure out what is causing them.

If your child rejects one of these foods, you might want to check with your doctor about testing for food sensitivities.

### **Other Possible Medical Conditions**

If your preschooler only wants to drink her meals, and gags on anything with chunks in it, or frequently throws up, her picky eating might be the result of a hidden medical problem. Here are some reasons why your child may be gagging on solid foods:

- Swollen [Tonsils](#) or [Adenoids](#) – Children who have chronic swelling in their throats may find it difficult or painful to swallow.
- [Gastroesophagal Reflux Disease](#) (GERD) – Some children with GERD may swallow food only to find it coming right back up. Others may have swollen tonsils or an inflamed throat from chronic reflux.
- [Sensory Processing Disorder](#) – Gagging can be an indicator of a rejection of a food. Some children with SPD will gag on food with a texture they don't like.

Here are some reasons your child may be refusing food:

- [A Virus](#) – A sudden onset of refusal to eat can be a first sign of a coming stomach bug.
- [Constipation](#) – A child who is constipated may stop eating and may be unable to explain why.
- [Eosinophilic Esophagitis](#) – EoE can cause the throat to become so swollen and raw that it is extremely painful to eat.

- [Anorexia Nervosa](#) – Younger children as well as teenagers can develop a psychological aversion to eating. Although this is often assumed to be an issue affecting only girls, recent research shows that there is growing incidence of boys developing eating disorders.
- [Food Sensitivity](#) – Sometimes there is food sensitivity such as [Celiac Disease](#) that is interacting with the psychological aspects of anorexia.
- [Another Underlying Medical Condition](#) – Many diseases that affect the kidneys, liver, or entire body can cause a loss of appetite in children. If your child is not eating anything, seek help from your pediatrician.

Emotional Distress – Children may limit their diets severely out of anxiety or stress. It may be helpful to speak with a psychologist or your family physician about it.

### *On the Upside*

Over all, children who tend to eat less and stay on the thin side (this translates to approximately 10 percent under average for their height) will likely be healthier and live longer lives. (Of course this doesn't hold true for a child who refuses to eat!) Studies confirm the one factor which will foreshadow longevity is a life-long ability to maintain a body weight that is slightly below average. Keep this in mind if your child pushes his plate away.

Here's more comfort: A recent study out of Finland looked at 500 picky five year olds and found their diets were not that different than kids described as "good eaters." The picky eaters ate a little less fiber and calcium. The biggest difference? Picky eaters ate most of their calories at snack time.

RELAX: A CHILD'S NUTRITIONAL NEEDS ARE MET ON A ONE-TO-TWO WEEK BASIS. THAT'S WHY KIDS DON'T HAVE TO EAT BALANCED MEALS *EVERY* DAY.

### **Chapter 2: Choosey Eaters**

Once upon a time your little one was game to try lots of different foods and might even have enjoyed a sophisticated cuisine. But almost overnight she became a pint-sized food critic. Now there are very few items your choosey child will agree to eat. And she's wildly erratic: one day macaroni and cheese is *yummy*, the next day it's a bowl of *ick*. Or, for a few days in a row, she'll fill her plate to the brim and eat like a hungry bear, and suddenly the following day, peck like a bird. Try new foods? Forget about it!

As tough as it may be to stay cool while your choosey eater is spreading negativity like butter, it's worth the effort. In order to keep your sanity and peace at the table, try not to hold onto any expectations and pepper your reactions with understanding. Think about this quote from the popular children's book series [Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#): "You can't expect everyone to have the same dedication as you." This goes for a balanced diet.

ASK YOURSELF: IS THIS REALLY A PROBLEM FOR MY CHILD – OR IS IT MORE A PROBLEM FOR ME?

Starting at around 4 to 6 months, children become very open to new experiences and will try most any food, but toddlerhood can change all that. It may be an evolutionary safeguard. Think about it: This picky eating mechanism most likely kept cave-toddlers safe from trying toxic berries or poisonous greens once they started exploring their expanding environment.

Speaking of environment, you'll want to avoid tension-building at meal times. It's a real appetite killer. You're more likely to stay centered and relaxed if you remind yourself that there's an excellent chance this stage will pass soon, usually around the age of six or seven. In the meantime, breathe deeply.

A study in the journal *Appetite* showed a strong association between choosy eaters and the level of eating enjoyment in their environment. If a heated disagreement is likely to ensue, resist the urge to insist your choosy child try a new food or eat more.

*I'm worried my 18-month-old isn't eating enough variety of foods or isn't eating enough and it's compromising her growth. Sometimes I wish she were back on formula!*

When anxious parents of choosy eaters come to my office, I measure and weigh their child and compare the results on the standard growth chart. More than ninety-five percent of the time, there is absolutely nothing to worry about. The child is growing fine and is perfectly healthy. Then I'll explain that a toddler's caloric needs are less than we think. Their tummies are small; a few spoonfuls of yogurt, peanut butter on whole grain crackers, even a fistful of grapes go a long way. That said if you have concerns about your child's growth and nutritional needs, make an appointment with your pediatrician and check it out.

There are plenty of other practical tips to help you and your little one through this stage.

### Strategies

**LET THEM CHOOSE PORTION SIZE:** Even if your offspring opts for an itty bitty amount, resist the urge to coax your child to take more. Appetites are more likely to increase when there's no pressure at mealtimes.

**OFFER VARIETY EARLY ON:** Studies in both laboratories and natural settings have shown that the more children are exposed to a food, the more likely they are to like it. Use the window between 4 months and 2 years old to offer your child as many different foods as possible. That way, when the pickiness of toddlerhood sets in, they have a larger menu to reduce.

**GIVE IT ANOTHER TRY:** Just because your choosy eater says "NO!" to once-beloved yogurt one week, it doesn't mean it will be nixed the next. A good rule of thumb is to offer a food ten times before pulling it from the menu.

**REFUSE TO BE A SHORT ORDER COOK:** Handing over all decisions to a child is never helpful. Kids really do need guidance on how to eat. Ultimately, you're the one who is in control. Here's a good rule worth remembering: The parent does the what, when and where. The child is responsible for how much and whether.

**OFFER OPTIONS:** At meal times, there should be a selection of foods without it becoming a buffet. Try not to fret if he only eats a piece of bread one night or digs into the fruit but ignores everything else.

**DIPPING DOES IT:** Serve veggies with a favorite dip or sauce or create interesting designs with cookie cutters.

**SHOP TOGETHER:** When you're in the store ask your child to help choose fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods.

**TEACH MANNERS:** "Yuck!" is not acceptable. A simple "No, thank you" is a better way to refuse a food offering.

**BE CREATIVE:** According to research, how food is plated affects desirability. Most kids in the study preferred seven different items with six different colors on their plates. FYI: Adults prefer only three colors and three different items.

**REMAIN REALISTIC:** As an adult there's a good chance there are certain foods you're not crazy about it. So don't expect your children to like everything even after they've gone beyond the choosy stage.

### Chapter 3: White Food Fanciers

Imagine a world where your child eats a rainbow of colored foods with heaping servings of red, green, yellow and orange fruits and vegetables. Okay, now stop dreaming. Despite research showing eating various colored fruits and vegetables is one of the keys to warding off several illnesses later in life, at this particular stage in your child's development, it's probably not going to happen. This is especially true if your child is a sensitive White Food Fancier (WFF).

**FAST FACT: AS MANY AS 50 PERCENT OF AMERICANS DON'T EAT A PIECE OF FRUIT ALL DAY LONG.**

If your kid is a WFF the menu is chosen precisely because it's bland. And most likely this new preference developed suddenly like a balloon bursting by surprise. That's because many WFFs start off as adventurous eaters and then around the age of two, or two-and-half, refuse anything with color. Instead, they opt exclusively for white or beige foods, usually carbohydrates. Favorites include: plain noodles, chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes, white bread, and white cheese.

Children's aversion to colorful foods is often developmentally triggered. At this stage in life, your toddler's world is broadening. One way to manage the swirl of stimuli is by attempting to control it. Eating only white or beige foods is a way for your toddler to limit the input of their overwhelming environment. Think about it: Food affects *all* our senses taste, smell, touch, sight –even sound. Bland, often soft, foods barely make a mark.

*Our son only eats four white foods. Any time I try to serve him anything else World War III breaks out. I'm an adventurous eater and love to cook, so his restrictions are driving me crazy.*

Even though it's understandable if parents get frustrated and try to pressure their kids into eating fruits and vegetables, any heavy handed encouragement will likely backfire. It's better to just set an example by enjoying your healthy choices.

According to a study published in the journal *Appetite*, maternal use of pressure to coax fruit or vegetable eating lowered the frequency of consumption by their little ones. On the other hand, maternal modeling of healthy eating behavior increased the frequency that their offspring ate fruits and vegetables.

**WHY NOT ASK YOUR TODDLER TO HELP WITH SIMPLE FOOD PREP?** By handling and touching different non-white foods without pressure to eat them, your toddler may be more likely to taste them at mealtime.

The good news? By the time most children reach ten years of age, they're digging into a wide spectrum of foods. Consider famed author Michael Pollan, author of several bestsellers on food. His son was a WWF. When he was young, Pollan's son only ate chicken, potatoes, bread, rice, and – nothing else. In fact, it was his son's limited relationship with food that got the author interested in writing about food in the first place. Then, about two years ago, Pollan's son, who is now sixteen, began to suddenly expand his menu. After working in a kitchen for a summer, he began cooking seriously, and is now a gourmet who eats a wide range of exotic specialties.

While you're waiting for your child to mature, you might be wringing your hands worried your little one isn't getting enough nutrients and fiber. But if your child is measuring within the growth chart and has energy to spare, there's probably nothing to worry about.

Of course, that doesn't mean you can't try to gently change a WWF's eating behaviors.

### *Strategies*

**COUNTERACT YOUR CONCERN:** Try not to express any anxiety or frustration. Remind yourself that your child is probably getting enough nutrients. What's more, there's an excellent chance this eating restriction will be entirely outgrown by age nine or ten. If you can't stop worrying, speak with your pediatrician about multi-vitamins.

**EXPRESS ENJOYMENT FOR COLORFUL FOODS:** "Oh, look how gorgeous these carrots are!" "Yum! This peach is delicious!"

**MAKE WHITE OR BEIGE SMOOTHIES:** Try making a smoothie out of soy milk and then add some white fruits like pears, yellow apples or white grapes.

**TRY CAULIFLOWER:** Combine it with mashed potatoes and your little one won't be the wiser. You can also try to disguise it in noodle or soft white cheeses. Any other way you can be "sneaky" and blend vegetables in with beloved white foods, why not make the attempt?

**OPT FOR CREAM OF WHEAT CEREAL:** Well, it's white and has a child's daily requirement for iron.

**JUST DO IT:** In a study of 396 Australian children between 3 to 5 years old, a positive correlation was found between a parent's intake of fruits and vegetables and that of their child. The more the parent ate, the more likely the children were to expand their diet. Children also ate more vegetables and fruits if they were given a choice of options. So, don't just put out apples, serve grapes, too; or celery and carrots.

**HEARTS OF PALM:** Really? Yes! Canned or jarred, these slightly sweet, slightly salty vegetables appeal to WWF kids and can be sliced into other dishes, or eaten out of hand like a carrot.

**TALK ABOUT IT:** Help your child understand that he has to take care of his body and he needs different groups of food to be healthy. You might ask for help planning a dinner. Who knows? You may be surprised by your kid's suggestions.

**BE PATIENT:** Most likely your child will outgrow an obsession with white foods. Meanwhile, consider this – a typical toddler needs multiple exposures to new foods before he'll risk tasting it – and 10 to 20 tastes before he actually likes it. So put the food on the table and see if your child will at least try it.

**OFFER A CHOICE:** Make sure there's a variety of foods – like pasta, rice or bread, a vegetable like potatoes and/or fruit, and some milk – so there's always something he'll want to eat.

## Chapter 4: Restrictor/Binger

Does your child hardly put a bite in his mouth for days and then suddenly vacuums up almost everything in sight? Or only eats raisins one day and just Cheerios the next? It's not unusual for parents to tell me that during those long lean days they worry their kid is going to starve to death. On the other hand, when their toddler is shoveling in food, there are flickers of anxiety about over-eating and possible stomach aches.

I agree this kind of eating can be a nail-biting roller coaster ride, but let me assure you, it's a perfectly normal one. And more likely than not, it won't last for too long.

Toddlers from one to three years need between 1,000 and 1,300 calories a day. But they probably won't eat it EVERY DAY. Parents of feast or famine kids make this your mantra: ***EXPECT ERRATIC EATING.***

As difficult as it may be, you must respect your child's personal hunger/full cycle. Likewise, it's important for little ones to trust their metabolic signals. When children learn to eat when hungry and to avoid food when the desire isn't there, they set the groundwork for maintaining a healthy weight as an adult. And don't expect too much. Keep in mind, after age two, slower growth often reduces a child's appetite. A few bites may be all she needs to feel full.

Genetically speaking, it's not unusual for some children to have a growth spurt later on compared to other kids in their age group. It's just a matter of wiring and body type. If that's the case, they may go through a period of "binge" eating when growth picks up. Try to remember what you were like as a child, or whether your spouse or another relative was relatively "smaller or thinner" than their childhood friends.

Some of your toddler's start and sputter eating may be due to his uncertainty about independence. Eating is an arena where kids can play out their ambivalence. By eating only when they're in the mood, children learn to eat to please themselves, not to please you.

Still, parental anxiety is typical.

*My four-year-old daughter is a terrible eater. She'll go for days without eating. It drives me so nuts, I end up bribing her with a toy, or threatening to take one away. My husband tells me just to relax and she'll eat when she's hungry. It's creating a lot of tension in our house. What's the best way to get her to eat?*

One thing is for sure, tension in the house won't help Lynn's daughter feel like eating. Even though you can lead a horse to water, you can't make him drink. With the same idea in mind, even though you can insist your kids come to the dinner table, you can't make them eat.

REMINDE YOURSELF: YOUR CHILD IS PROBABLY EATING MORE THAN YOU THINK.

### Strategies

**RALLY AROUND THE TABLE:** Make it a requirement for your non-eater to sit at the table with the rest of the family until you've all finished your meals. Many times your little one will end up taking at least a few bites.

**STAY SOCIAL:** Take the pressure off eating by creating a mealtime atmosphere of conversation and sharing. Just enjoy each other's company. Researchers at the University of Illinois found that children ages 7 to 11 who did well on school achievement tests spent a large amount of time eating meals and snacks with their families. Their achievement was not affected by their mother's employment status, full-time, part-time or not employed..

**OFFER A LIGHT-HEARTED WARNING:** Before taking away the dinner plates, you can lightly suggest your child might want to eat something then sing out a warning: "The kitchen will be closing in five minutes. Last chance!" You don't want to be manipulated by the "I'm hungry" excuse right before bedtime.

**BE EASY BREEZY:** If your child picks up the vibe that you're unhappy about their eating habit, it could escalate into a fierce battle of wills. Don't use threats or punishments. It only boosts the power struggle. Take deep breaths ... and don't forget your mantra: EXPECT ERRATIC EATING.

**HONOR TINY TUMMIES:** Keep servings small so your child doesn't feel overwhelmed. A child's stomach is approximately the size of his fist. Dish out small portions and only refill the plate if your child asks for more. Remind yourself that young children don't require a lot of calories.

**ASK A PLAYMATE FOR DINNER:** If your child is going through the restrictor stage, invite a friend over who is the same age, or slightly older, and is someone you know "likes to eat." Your child may catch on to the example being set.

**BE AN ENTHUSIASTIC CHEERLEADER:** If your child makes a disparaging face or comment at the food you've just served, model a positive attitude. "Oh great, more for me! YUM!"

LIMIT BOTTLES OR SIPPY CUPS: Stick with water and have your little one satisfy hunger with solid foods not liquids like juice, soy or cow's milk.

REMIND YOURSELF: If it seems as though your child is hardly eating anything, remember the days he catches up and eats like mad.

RECORD THE EVIDENCE: To help you relax about your child's eating habits, keep a food journal of what your child eats for two weeks. Your babysitter can do this, too. If you discover your child is severely under-eating or binging wildly speak with your pediatrician. FYI: Don't forget to include snacks!

YOU CAN PREPARE THE FOOD, MAKE IT INCREDIBLY APPETIZING, OFFER ALTERNATIVES AND STILL ... HOW MUCH YOUR LITTLE ONES EAT IS UP TO THEM.

### Some Thoughts on Dieting

The Kids' Eating Disorders survey conducted by the Eating Disorders Program at the Medical University of South Carolina, reviewed the eating behavior of 3,100 students in grades five through eight. Over 40 percent of the children reported feeling fat and wishing they could lose weight. Twenty-three percent admitted they were sometimes afraid to eat because of weight gain. That's not all. More than one third of fifth-graders and half of eighth-graders confessed to dieting regularly *and* dangerously with diet pills, other over-the-counter medications, vomiting or by purging with laxatives.

Although dieting in children can be influenced by the media's message of *skinny is sexy and sensational*, its foundation is usually poor body image and low self-esteem. But be aware some parents unintentionally contribute to their kid's eating anxiety by criticizing their own bodies, following fad diets, or exercising excessively.

If you suspect your child might not be eating because of body image problems, speak with your family doctor. Obviously eating right and regularly isn't a practice all kids do all the time – but extreme dieting, especially while kids are still growing and developing, is dangerous to their health and wellbeing.

### Chapter 5: Super Snackers

It's not easy for a parent to say "no" when their child is asking for a snack. After all, we get pleasure from seeing our little ones eat, and of course we want to keep them happy. But if your child is a fierce grazer and won't sit still at mealtimes, limiting between-meal treats, or sticking to ultra-nutritious options, may be the best way to go. We can help our kids grow into the kind of adults who are conscious of when, how much, and what they eat, by paying attention to the number and kinds of snacks we give them now. It may be a lot to put on *your* plate, but it's worth the effort.

According to research reported in the journal *PLoS Medicine*, and conducted at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the biggest single contributor to the sharp rise in calorie intake has been the number of snacks Americans eat each day. Over the past 30 years, the study found Americans have gone on average from consuming 3.8 to 4.9 snacks a day. That's a 29 percent increase!

*My child won't eat much at meal times, but I think he's getting plenty of calories by grazing on snacks throughout the day. Is it okay?*

When parents ask me this question, I need more information before I can give them an answer. I want to know what kinds of snacks their children are consuming. If it's a lot of processed crackers, cookies, chips, or sugary juices, their child may be getting plenty of calories, but not much nutrition. If children fill up on these kinds of empty calories, by the time meals are served they couldn't care less. Timing is also important. If your children snack right before dinner, well, of course, they're going to be full and have no interest in joining the rest of the family for mealtime.

Plus, children who are on-the-graze whether in the car, watching television, playing in the park, or just reading, can develop unconscious eating habits. In the process, they may lose a connection with their real hunger signals and end up eating for emotional reasons. As most of us have experienced, food helps to calm our anxiety. It's no different for our kids.

But here's the conundrum: Active children *need* to snack because they are burning calories at a high rate. Younger children, toddlers especially, have tiny appetites because their stomachs are tiny. Add to this mix that most little ones also have shorter attention spans, and eating on the go and not sitting still for a meal, is a natural choice.

That's probably why it's a common practice. According to a cross-sectional telephone survey reported in the *Journal of the American Dietary Association*, which covered over 3,000 infants and toddlers between the ages of 4 to 24 months, the percentage of children eating snacks increased with age. The survey found that afternoon snack was consumed by over 80 percent of toddlers (12 to 24 months). In addition, snacks provided about 25 percent of toddlers' daily energy intake.

What are these toddlers eating? Typical snack foods are milk, cookies, crackers, chips and fruit drinks.

Ideally, if your child is a grazer, you want to aim for mini-grazing which includes three healthy snacks *and* three meals.

It's interesting to note that snacking several times a day, rather than eating large meals, has been promoted by some medical experts as a healthy alternative for adults. A study conducted at the University of Cambridge found that eating more frequently lowered levels of artery-clogging LDL cholesterol. The study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, found that people who ate six small meals each day had an average artery-clogging LDL cholesterol level that was five percent lower than those who ate only one or two big meals each day.

The problem with adult grazing is that many people ignore the part about eating only a little, and focus only on the suggestion to "eat often." The result is out-of-control snacking. The key to a healthy grazing approach is to pack mini meals with enough nutritional punch and fiber to sustain appetites without adding a lot of unnecessary saturated fat and calories.

*I can prepare a meal for my daughter, Sarah, with all her favorites. But put her down at the table and in less than 15 seconds she pushes her plate away. Unless I want to get into a battle, I let her leave. But inevitably, two hours later her hand is out and she wants a snack. What can I do to change her behavior?*

Plenty of parents are intimate with this particular frustration. You probably won't, and really shouldn't stop providing snacks. So, what's the best advice? Control what foods are given as well as the times and frequency they are offered. A consistent snack routine, instead of just spontaneous grazing, is a practical solution to resolving what could turn into harmful food habits.

There are other ways you can help your child take hold of snacking behaviors. But keep in mind like most things in life it will probably take patience and compromise.

### *Strategies*

**ALLOW MEALTIMES TO EXTEND A LITTLE LONGER:** This may sound counter-intuitive, but many toddlers have a tough time making transitions. If you can give your child more time to settle down and get into the scene, you increase the chance for mealtime eating. Also, keep your time together fun with plenty of conversation. If she still wants out, let her go. The last thing at this stage you want is a battle.

**PAY ATTENTION TO SNACK SIZES:** No parent wants to think of their child going hungry, so it's natural to pack lots and lots of snacks, especially on trips to the park or when you're driving in the car. This doesn't mean you need to keep offering food if your child hasn't requested a snack.

**BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF:** Does your inner voice tell you that your children won't be happy if they're not eating every 20 minutes? Are you contributing to grazing habits? Do you give in to whining?

**SET THE SCENE:** Whenever you can, have your child sit in a designated eating area for snacks, just as they would for a meal. It doesn't have to be the dining table, it could be their play table or on a particular bench in the park.

**TIME IT:** If it's possible only offer snacks 1-1/2 to 2 hours between meals. Of course, you need to remain flexible. If your child has a particularly active day and is cranky with hunger, relent.

**USE DISTRACTION:** If you know it's near mealtime and your child is asking for a snack, employ distraction. At this stage, it's much easier and more effective than asking them to wait, or saying no.

**KEEP IT NUTRITIOUS:** Cheese, yogurt, whole grain crackers, popcorn, sliced cucumber, grapes, carrot sticks, sliced apples and pears, cubed melons, hard-boiled eggs, rice cakes and sesame sticks are all good options. But pay attention to portion size. Ideally, pack snacks in separate small bags. For example, avoid letting your toddler reach into a big box of crackers, or family-size bag of popcorn.

**GIVE IT TIME:** Most children learn how to eat more at meal times as they move toward preschool.

## Chapter 6: Sugar Insisters

In a perfect world our little ones would be oblivious to the pleasures of sugar. But even the most conscientious parent knows this sweet scenario is highly unlikely. Consider a recent article in the *New York Times* citing a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: “More than 90 percent of food products advertised on Saturday morning television programs exceed recommended dietary guidelines for sugar.” Any good news? Despite the media’s bombardment, most kids can usually take a firm “no” from a parent when it comes to candy and other super sweet snacks.

Remember, I said *most*. Sugar Insisters are different. They crave the stuff, want more, more, more –and when you turn down their demand, you’re most likely in for a bitter fight.

**SUGAR FROM SODA AND PROCESSED JUICE DRINKS ADD MORE SUGAR TO A PRE-SCHOOLERS’S DAILY DIET THAN OTHER SWEET SNACKS LIKE CANDY, ICE CREAM, AND COOKIES... COMBINED!**

When it comes to sweet cravings, try not to blame your parenting skills or your child’s nagging. Research from the University of Chicago shows that children have a stronger desire for sugar than most adults; they’re biologically programmed to be this way. In other words, kids don’t have to learn to love sweets, it just comes naturally. In fact, it’s been discovered that newborns can not only detect sweet flavors but actually prefer sweeter solutions to less sweet ones.

In addition, some kids are more primed for the sweet stuff than others. Another study published in the journal *Pediatrics* confirms that a newly discovered taste gene (TAS2R38A), combined with cultural differences, is associated with preference for sucrose and sweet-tasting foods and beverages. Variations in this gene could be the reason why your Sugar Insister has such an extreme sweet tooth.

There’s also a developmental influence. Sometimes strong-willed and intense young children insist on sweets as a way to test their power. They know their parents are setting limits and this is yet another way to tell them “Hey, I’m in charge – not you!” This kind of power struggle usually surfaces around age three. But parents are wise to not give in –completely.

The American Academy of Pediatrics urges parents to control the sugar in their children's diets to help prevent tooth decay, childhood obesity and obesity-related illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease.

*My toddler demands dessert before he'll eat anything else no matter what the meal.*

Although every case and each child is different, when parents are dealing with an extremely willful child, I usually suggest they consider compromising rather than setting a hard line. Once again, the last dynamic you want to create at mealtimes is a combative one. However, this doesn’t mean you want your child to rule the roost, especially when it comes to sugar intake. What do I suggest? If you have a Sugar Insister, give your child some decision-making power. This may seem like a radical solution but if your child is creating World War III around dessert, agree he can enjoy one a day. That’s *your* rule. Now hand power over to him by allowing your child to choose when he wants to eat it. If he chooses to eat dessert before breakfast, bite your tongue and allow the decision to stick. But remember: your “one dessert” rule is non-negotiable, except for special occasions such as parties.

**ACCORDING TO THE AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION, THE TYPICAL CHILD GETS MORE THAN 20 PERCENT OF DAILY CALORIES FROM SUGAR!**

*Although I initially forbid any sugary snacks in our home, once my daughter started going to pre-school and birthday parties and tasted the sweet stuff, I relaxed my rules and have allowed cookies in our home. Now she's the Cookie Monster and begs me relentlessly. What did I do wrong?*

Nothing. Welcome to the real world. Sometimes parents who “demonize” sugar create a backlash. A child may end up bingeing on sweets whenever they’re available and then lying about it out of fear of reprimand. For children who aren’t suffering with a medical condition like diabetes (which contraindicates sugar), I would suggest you allow your child a certain number of cookies a day. Three is usually a reasonable amount. Be clear about the number and always use a reminder: “This is your second cookie. You can have one more today.” Then, to be sure your little one understands, repeat with a follow-up question: “How many more cookies can you have today?”

In conclusion, if your child can enjoy occasional sweets without being controlled by them, relax. In modest amounts, sugar can have a healthy place in a child's diet. But if your kid is a Sugar Insister, there are ways around it.

## Strategies

**DON'T MAKE DESSERT A REWARD:** If you give your child the message that dessert is the most delicious food on the menu it will boost their desire for it. Also, don't offer dessert regularly. Make scheduled dessert nights, perhaps only once or twice a week.

**OFFER A BOUNTY OF SWEET OPTIONS:** Let your little one know that desserts aren't just about cookies, cake or ice cream. They also include fresh or dried fruit, frozen or regular yogurt, and other sweet, more natural choices.

**AVOID DEMONIZING SUGAR:** By declaring some foods "bad" children will become curious about them. It's a natural instinct for young ones to want to explore something that is declared "forbidden."

**LEAVE TASTE OUT OF DISCUSSIONS:** Make it a habit to talk about a food's color, shape, aroma and texture as a way to determine if it tastes good.

**TALK ABOUT IT:** You can educate even the littlest ones about how some super sweet foods may taste good, but they won't necessarily give them the fuel they need to play energetically.

**HAND OVER SOME CONTROL:** You want your rules to be clear. You decide how much and how many sweet treats, but let your child decide when.

**NIX BRIBES:** Have you heard yourself say: "Eat one more bite and then you can have dessert"? It's a tough trap to avoid (especially if your child is also a fussy eater) but you'll want to navigate around it.

**SET A GOOD EXAMPLE:** Don't keep candy bars in your purse or in your car's glove compartment.

## Chapter 7: Finishing the Meal

Picky eating can make you feel devalued, dissed, defeated and worse –worried. It's also problematic for your child whenever it triggers unnecessary conflict and stress within the family. Hopefully, The Picky Eating Solution has helped ease your frustration and fears and given you and your little one the strategies to enjoy happier more nourishing meal times. But along with using the techniques offered in this book, it's helpful to keep picky eating in perspective. So, I'd like to remind you of a few important points.

First and most importantly, picky eating is usually a normal developmental stage and will likely pass. Between the first eighteen months to two years of age, most children accept the foods parents give them. But then, out of the blue, your child could start getting choosy – maybe *super-choosy*. It can take the form of eating a limited variety of foods, avoiding a particular food group, like vegetables; only opting for white foods, like plain pasta and dry crackers; throwing a tantrum when the food they want isn't offered; or not sitting still for a meal.

The good news is that in most instances, the strategies offered in The Picky Eating Solution can help ease your kid's culinary crankiness.

Your own food likes and dislikes will also influence your kid's attitude about food. For example, if you can't stomach asparagus or fish, don't expect your child to be game to dig in. If you're always watching your weight, turning down starchy foods and commenting negatively on them, your kid may also become a watchful eater. Not surprisingly, a study of children between the ages of six and twelve years showed that a parent's eating enjoyment serves as an important and central factor in a kid's picky eating behavior. If your children see you trying new foods and enjoying a wide variety of fare, they'll be more likely to follow your positive example.

But a heavy handed approach won't work. A recent study showed that the overall fruit consumption of children between the ages of four and eight years increased more if their mothers didn't pressure them to eat. It's better to sit back and keep the good vibes in the household going than to hunker down in a battle over dinner.

That said, while a certain amount of finicky eating is normal, there are rare situations when pickiness goes beyond a common phase in a kid's development. If your child has any of the following conditions, make an appointment with your pediatrician to check it out:

- Slow weight gain
- Weight loss
- Extremely limited diet that may lack key nutrients
- Continuous tantrums, extreme fussiness or inconsolable crying at meals or whenever food is presented
- Fear about eating or anxiety whenever food is presented
- Choking, coughing or gagging when food is offered or while eating

- Immature feeding skills. This includes only eating pureed foods beyond infancy or the inability to use feeding utensils.

If your child's pickiness is impacting your child's health or your family's happiness, it may also be advantageous to consult a feeding specialist. Or, your pediatrician might suggest a "team" to work with your family. This team can include a primary care physician, dietitian, gastroenterologist, psychologist, speech/language pathologist, and occupational therapist. These professionals would work with your child and the rest of the family to determine ways to meet nutritional needs and expand your child's diet to include a greater variety of eating options.

For further information about eating issues check out these sources:  
American Academy of Pediatrics

[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition

[www.naspghan.org](http://www.naspghan.org)

Gastrokids

[www.gastrokids.org](http://www.gastrokids.org)

Nutrition needs

[www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)

Children's nutrition: 10 tips for picky eaters

[www.mayoclinic.com/Health/Childrens-Health/HQ01107](http://www.mayoclinic.com/Health/Childrens-Health/HQ01107)

Zero to Three: How to Handle Picky Eaters

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

Guide to Picky Eating

[www.parents.com](http://www.parents.com)

The Attached Family: A Resource for Parents of Picky Eaters

[www.theattachedfamily.com](http://www.theattachedfamily.com) Terrific Parenting: Picky Eaters

[www.terrificparenting.com/picky-eaters](http://www.terrificparenting.com/picky-eaters)

It's Not About Nutrition: Cooking with Kids

[www.itsnotaboutnutrition.squarespace.com](http://www.itsnotaboutnutrition.squarespace.com)

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