

Picky Eaters? What to Do

Mom, what's this on my plate?" asked Melissa, age three, as she poked at a piece of FriChik. "Oh, that's FriChik. Try some. It's yummy. I'm sure you will like it," said Mom. "It looks funny," replied Melissa. "Try just one bite," pleaded Mother. "No, it's yucky," responded Melissa. This kind of talk goes on in thousands of American homes daily. When Melissa was 14 months she ate contentedly whatever was in her dish, with copious amounts smeared over her face. Often she wanted some of whatever was on Mom's plate. What happens to children about such changes? Well, it is part of growing up. With some children they are learning to discriminate. Carol Lynn Mithers says, "A toddler's rejection of a new food may also be one of those attempts at independence and autonomy that are common and healthy at this age."* It is natural for children to want to be in control of their choices. Usually they don't like anything new.

Susan Levine, a therapist specializing in children says, "Routine and predictability gives them a strong sense of security." Levine goes on to say, "Children are wonderful in terms in knowing what they need nutritionally."* Children and toddlers who reject food may be asserting their independence in a perfectly normal way. Autonomy is a healthy characteristic. Children feel secure in repeating their actions, over and over. They want to hear the same stories, wear the same clothing, day after day. They like watching the same videos. Macaroni and cheese day after day would be just fine with Melissa. But Melissa needs to eat a variety of foods to remain in good health.

Children have different personalities. Some are more adventuresome than others. This carries over into their selection of food. Adults should remember that children have likes and dislikes as they do. I remember well some of the antics we used to entice our Freddy boy to eat his potatoes. "Freddy, here comes your 'airplane' carrying a load of delicious potatoes and gravy. And the pilot wants to land in Freddy's mouth." Such fanfare worked some times, but most of the time it didn't.

Young children are often very curious about what's on Mommy's or Daddy's plate. When they ask about food on your plate, let them beg for some—then give them a little bite. Then if they ask, give them more. Talk about how good it tastes. Tell them that God made our tongues to taste so we could enjoy food. In her article Carol Mithers quotes Ellyn Satter: "Toddlers are very consistent about responding negatively to pressure.' And parental pressure includes not only saying 'Eat this or else,' but also resorting to bribes."*

One mother capitalized on her three-year-old's love of dip. So she served gravy as a dip. The child loved it. It wasn't long until she was eating mashed potatoes and gravy as if they were going out of style. Some children are still picky eaters at nine or ten years of age. Sometimes these children can be persuaded to eat more healthy foods by talking about the relationship between the quality of food and muscle strength. "Larry, if you are interested in more energy and big muscles you need carbohydrates and proteins and that's why we serve potatoes and bread. And don't forget your veggies. They provide vitamins and minerals."

Cut back on cookies and ice cream. Explain the dangers of too much sweets.

An adult, 30 years old, who is still a picky eater is to be pitied. This has serious social implications. Who wants to invite a person to dinner who has a long list of foods he or she won't eat. "If it has onions, olives, tomato, or cucumber in it, Jake won't touch it. He is a real nice guy," said Laura, "but he's a pain to cook for. When we go out to eat it takes him forever to decide what to order."

If your child is growing normally, drinks his milk, takes his vitamins, shows up normal on the height and weight chart, and your pediatrician is happy, don't worry too much. Serve a variety of healthy foods. According to Levine, "Toddlers need to be exposed to foods again and again in a neutral setting . . . with parents eating and enjoying themselves. . . Then let them pick and choose."* They will probably outgrow their picky eating habits.

"Food can be prepared simply and healthfully, but it requires skill to make it both palatable and nourishing . . . The meals should be varied. The same dishes prepared in the same way, should not appear on the table meal after meal and day after day. The meals are eaten with greater relish, and the system is better nourished, when the food is varied. . . Irregularities in eating destroy the healthful tone of the digestive organs, to the detriment of health and cheerfulness. . . The stomach should be allowed to rest for five hours. Not a particle of food should be introduced into the stomach till the next meal. . . Mothers make a great mistake in permitting them [their children] to eat between meals. . . There are few who realize as they should how much their habits of diet have to do with their health, their character, their usefulness in this world, and their eternal destiny." *Child Guidance*, pp. 372, 373, 387, 389, 398.

*Carol Lynn Mithers, *Parenting*, February 2000.