

Picky Eaters at Your Table? You Can Handle This

Do you have a picky eater kid in your family - or maybe more than one? A new study suggests a different approach to how you could handle the problem.

Picky eating — for centuries, it has been a common trait among children, and a common worry among parents. In fact, entire books have been written on the subject.

In June 2020, however, a study of 317 children and their mothers shed some new light on the topic and may change your approach in dealing with your angst-ridden mealtime.

Picky Eating Insights

Published in the journal *Pediatrics*, the study's researchers observed the 317 mother-kid duos for four years. The observations occurred via a questionnaire when the children were ages 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9. Here is what they found:

- **Forcing food on kids reinforces pickiness.** While holding a hard line on what a kid will eat is an approach that many parents use, the researchers found that this approach only makes the kid more selective. In fact, the more parents tried to control or restrict meal options, the pickier their kids became.
- **Pickiness becomes ingrained around age 4.** The researchers also noted that if the child didn't like new things at age 4, they tended to stay particular about what they would eat throughout their school-age years. As a result, they suggest that the toddler and preschool years may be the most

effective time to try to introduce new foods at mealtime.

- **Picky eaters have lower BMIs.** Finally, only eating certain foods wasn't all bad, according to the study results. As a rule, the picky-eating kids in the study tended to have lower BMIs and were in a healthier range than their non-picky counterparts.

Patience wins out

Oneith O. Cadiz, M.D., a pediatrics expert at the University of Miami Health System, found the results of the study interesting, but she says that they didn't drastically change her recommendations for families struggling with food preference issues at mealtime. In fact, she has long been an advocate of the American Academy of Pediatrics-approved approach of not fighting and remaining patient with picky-eating children.

"The approach to picky eaters is much the same as toilet training or biting or any other common childhood behavior that parents wish to extinguish," she says. "How a child behaves and whether their behaviors persist is often based on how the parents respond. If the behavior is reinforced with attention (both positive and negative), then it will persist."

Dr. Cadiz's top tips for handling the picky eaters in your family:



- **Don't fight.** Fight with a picky child, says Dr. Cadiz, and you will lose every time. Instead, she recommends this approach: Let the child not eat, but keep their food on the plate and ready for them to eat later. When he inevitably becomes hungry later on, he has the choice to eat dinner or go to bed hungry.
- **Focus on quality, not quantity.** If your child will not eat healthy foods, you might have too many unhealthy snacks in your house. To change this paradigm, Dr. Cadiz advises filling your home with healthy options like fruits, vegetables, peanut butter, raisins, and cereals. If the only options are healthy, then your child will settle on one of them.
- **Stay patient and consistent.** It may seem trying at the time, but your child is not going to starve, says Dr. Cadiz. If you can mentally train yourself to be patient, remain calm, and keep a consistent approach, then you will gradually see your child's attitude toward food start to change. "The goal is often just to get children to try new foods, not necessarily like them all," she says. "Praise them for the act of trying even if they didn't like it. Then do not nag, harass, or push any further once they have tried it."
- **Make food fun.** As your child grows a little older, Dr. Cadiz suggests including him or her in the meal planning and preparation process. Having a stake in family mealtime can be a big motivation when it comes to trying new foods. And the mess that gets created in the kitchen is well worth it when your choosy child actually actually likes the food he helped prepare.

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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