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PICKY EATERS

Your lovable toddler is a charming, entertaining, on-the-go child. But your child's changeable nature can be a source of exasperation, especially when you try to feed your toddler a balanced diet. In short, your child has become the dreaded "picky eater."

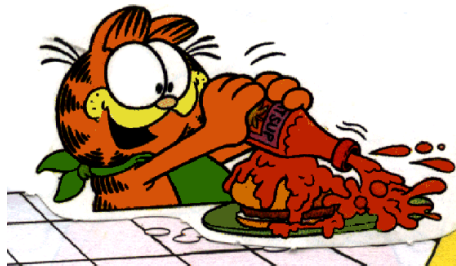
Dilemma: My toddler suddenly hates the foods he used to love. Help!

Solution: It's perplexing, but your child's food fatigue is not as unusual as it seems, says pediatrician Jennifer Shu, MD, co-author of *Food Fights*. "Adults may suddenly become tired of the same foods, too."

However, little ones don't have the language skills to express their sudden change of heart about food, leaving you in the lurch at meal time. Shu tells WebMD that a toddler's rejection of favorite foods is natural, but could become problematic when you mistakenly assume that it means "I hate this food and I never want to eat it again."

So what's a puzzled parent to do for this toddler feeding problem? First, resist the urge to overreact. "Understand that younger toddlers generally do not reject the food you've prepared for them in order to drive you crazy," says Kerry Neville, MS, RD. In addition, it's important to remember that a toddler's appetite can temporarily wane when teething or ill, causing temporary disregard even for tried-and-true mealtime favorites. Older toddlers may reject foods to garner attention or as a way to assert their independence, or both, because it's fun to watch their parents react.

Whatever the case, because toddlers are characteristically fickle, parents should remain flexible. And, they should try not to worry. "As long as you serve a variety of healthy foods every day, your toddler will find something on his plate to eat," says Sanna Delmonico, MS, RD, founder of Tiny Tummies.



Dilemma: My 2-year-old prefers just a few foods. How can I encourage my child to try new ones and not be such a picky eater?

Solution: It's tough to figure out why your tyke passes up mashed sweet potatoes and scorns cubes of moist, grilled chicken, foods that you consider perfectly kid-friendly.

The reason why toddlers are picky eaters? A toddler's natural tendency toward *food neophobia*, the wholesale rejection of unfamiliar foods, sometimes without even so much as a taste. Vegetables seem to be particularly prone to the effects of food neophobia.

Why all the fuss over new foods? "Nobody really knows," Shu says. A toddler's busy life could play a part.

Toddlers spend most of their waking hours mastering new skills, such as walking and talking. Toddlers are often so consumed by novel experiences that they cannot tolerate any surprises on their plates, especially when they're tired.

Experts recommend riding out new-food resistance (it *is* a phase) armed with good cheer and some surefire survival strategies.

- Serve one tablespoon of a new food earlier in the day, when kids tend to be the most energetic and the least aggravated.
- Offer new foods without pressure. "Avoid pleading and cajoling kids to eat," Neville says.
- Get toddlers involved. When possible, have children help you prepare the foods you'd like them to try. For example, older toddlers are capable of tearing lettuce for salad, Delmonico says.
- Be a positive role model. Children, even young toddlers, are highly suggestible. If you'd like your child to eat broccoli, then you should, too.
- Avoid making only your child's favorites. Serving the likes of mac and cheese, hot dogs, plain pasta, and chicken nuggets to her when she's young ensures she'll expect only those foods when she's older.
- Keep trying. Although some toddlers may readily gobble up any food you put in front of them, many will not. Research suggests it may take 10 or more exposures to new foods before children accept them.

Dilemma: How should I handle a 3-year-old who refuses to eat dinner nearly every night and would rather feed the food to the dog?

"Playing with food is normal, and fun for a kid," Neville says. When it happens on a regular basis, something else may be at work, however. Tuckered-out toddlers may not be particularly hungry for the evening meal, and would rather share their food with the dog.

Or, your child could be lobbing food to get a rise out of you.

"Toddlers test everything out -- including your patience," Delmonico says. Solve this toddler feeding problem by staying cool while sending your child the signal that mealtime is for eating, and not so much for playing. Or for feeding Fido.



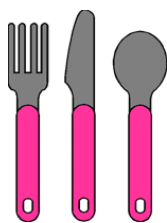
"Each time your child feeds the dog or throws food on the floor, calmly remove him from his high chair," says Shu. "If he indicates he wants to eat, put him back in. After taking him out a couple of times, that meal is over."

Of course, removing the dog from the room at mealtimes will reduce a toddler's temptation, too.

Dilemma: My little one wants to feed himself. When is it OK to give children cups and utensils?

Solution: Probably earlier than you think.

You can give children a plastic-coated baby spoon to hold when you start feeding them solids, and they can handle a sippy cup with water, infant formula, or breast milk between 6-9 months old, Shu says. Toddler forks with blunt tines come later. "Most children can use a fork by 3 to 4 years of age," says Shu. Don't expect much food or drink to actually get into your toddler's mouth at first. Prepare yourself for messy mealtimes, but don't let that deter you from letting your toddler try to self-feed. "Children learn by imitation and they need to practice self-feeding," Neville says.



Dilemma: I have a 3-year-old who still wants to be fed like a baby. What should I do?

Solution: "Toddlers are more likely to feed themselves when they see others doing the same," Shu says. As much as possible, sit at the table together as a family so that your toddler can imitate your behavior.

If your child has been feeding himself and stopped, there could be a reason, such as a younger sibling that's getting the attention your toddler desires, says Neville.

Whatever the reason, Neville cautions against getting into a battle of wills over toddler eating issues. Here are some tricks that may encourage self-feeding:

- Provide finger foods that they can manage to get into their mouths all by themselves.
- Use a favorite dish and cup.

"If you know your child is capable of self-feeding, give him the food and the utensils and just let him be, and chances are he'll come around," Delmonico says.

Shu says some children have developmental delays that prevent them from feeding themselves. Talk with your pediatrician about your concerns.



Dilemma: I've noticed that my toddler doesn't eat very much at mealtimes. What should I do to improve my child's food intake?

Solution: In this case, your child may not necessarily be a picky eater. Grazing -- characterized as near-continuous nibbling or drinking, or both, throughout the day -- may be to blame.

"Grazers are often full when meal times roll around," says Delmonico.

Discourage grazing by loosely scheduling healthy meals and snacks. Think of snacks as mini-meals, and serve the same foods you would at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, such as whole grains, lean protein sources, fruits, and vegetables. When you serve healthy foods for snacks, there's no need to be concerned if your child skimps on the next meal.

In addition to offering an array of healthy foods throughout the day, trust the cues your child is giving you about her hunger level. "Kids instinctively regulate their appetites by eating when they are hungry and stopping when full," says Neville.

Dilemma: It seems as if my toddler hardly eats anything at all. How do I know my child is OK?

Solution: During the first year of life, children typically triple their birth weight and add upwards of 10 inches of height to their frames. Growth slows down after a child's first birthday, and so does appetite.

"It's not unusual for kids to go through phases where it seems they barely eat enough to get by," says Neville. The good news about this toddler feeding problem? Left to their own devices, children typically tend to eat what they need. However, some children may not be getting enough for a variety of reasons.

To allay your fears, ask your pediatrician if your child is growing well according to measurements (head circumference, weight, and length) on the growth charts. You may need to consult with a registered dietitian about your child's eating habits.

It's fun to get together
and have something
good to eat at least
once a day. That's
what human life is all
about-enjoying things.
-Julia Child

This newsletter has been issued by:

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