

It's completely frustrating when you spend hours carefully planning your child's meals, standing in the kitchen preparing it with love, only for it to get thrown across the table or splattered on the floor! Fussy eating is a challenge most parents face. It is part of a developmental stage many children go through as they strive to become more independent. The issue for parents is the natural feeling of anxiety when we feel our children are not eating enough or eating the right types of foods. We worry their bodies are not receiving the right nutrients that will support their growth and optimize their health. As well as dealing with the struggle during mealtimes as we are faced with resistance from our picky eaters towards the healthy foods we serve.



Here are 8 tips that could help you transform your toddler from a picky eater into a healthy one!

## 8 TIPS ON HOW TO HANDLE PICKY EATERS

### 1. Consistency is Key

The number one rule when handling picky eaters is to be consistent and never give up! There are a few things to consider when noticing your child's response to certain foods:

- a) Children naturally prefer sweeter tasting foods because they familiarize it with the "sweetness" of their mother's milk and that makes it feel safe for them to consume. Children also have an innate response to reject other "not so sweet" flavors such as bitter or sour as a natural defense mechanism because these new flavors are intensively different and do not feel safe! During the beginning phase of introducing foods to your child you are working on *developing* their taste buds to appreciate and accept different flavors and learn that these flavors are safe to consume. This process takes *time* and constant *repetition*.

For example, when a child is served broccoli for the first time and reacts with squinting eyes and spitting it out, most parents automatically assume the child doesn't like broccoli! They stop serving it and move on to the next. It could take 10 times of exposure before a child begins to accept a certain food, sometimes up to 50 times! sometimes they will not accept it at all, but if you only try to serve broccoli 3-4 times and give up because your child is rejecting it, you interrupt the process and the possibility of your child developing a taste for it in the future.



We must remember that children are still learning to like the new foods they are exposed to, the more they are exposed to it the more likely they will develop a taste for it.



Keep in mind that children have more taste buds than adults do, they taste intensely! Flavors that are bitter seem 10 times more bitter to children and that can feel overwhelming or offensive to them. Every child has a natural taste preference, as they grow, they develop preferences towards other flavors. If we want our children to like certain foods, those foods must always show up on their plates, even if they reject them.



Our role as parents or caregivers is to familiarize children with different flavors through repeated exposure and respect their pace and choices as they develop their own taste preferences.

## 2. Presentation Matters

You must feed their eyes before you feed their tummies! Here are a few meal presentation tips that can help encourage your little one to try different and new foods!

### a) Serve Small Quantities

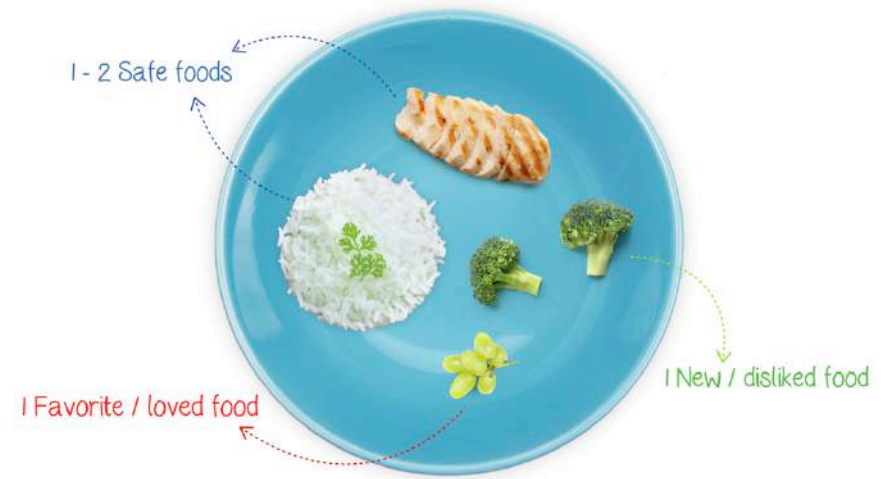
- Children can get very overwhelmed when they see big quantities of food on their plates, especially if they are not so fond of that food. It could lead to a sense of anxiety, pressure, and a typical reaction of rejection at first sight. Presenting foods in *smaller quantities* and *bite size pieces* is more inviting to the child and reduces their sense of pressure.



Small quantities /  
bite size pieces

## b) Provide a Variety

- Give them options! Children love to practice their independence and make their own choices. Giving them the option of what to eat first or how much they want to eat from each food will encourage them to explore what's on their plates!
- Include a variety of **3-4 different food groups** during each meal.
  - 1 food they love
  - 1-2 foods that are safe (they feel neutral about – don't love it, don't hate it)
  - 1 new food you are trying to introduce or gain their acceptance towards.



If your child has the slightest appetite, they will most likely be thrilled to see the food they love on their plate and eat it up in no time. If they are feeling super hungry, they will probably pick on the (neutral) food on their plate after they are done eating the food they loved. Respect your child's appetite and the choices they make at the table. We know it's easier said than done, but try not to force, beg, plead, bribe, or show signs of frustration.

It is your job to present them with healthy different options,  
it is their job to decide what to do with those options

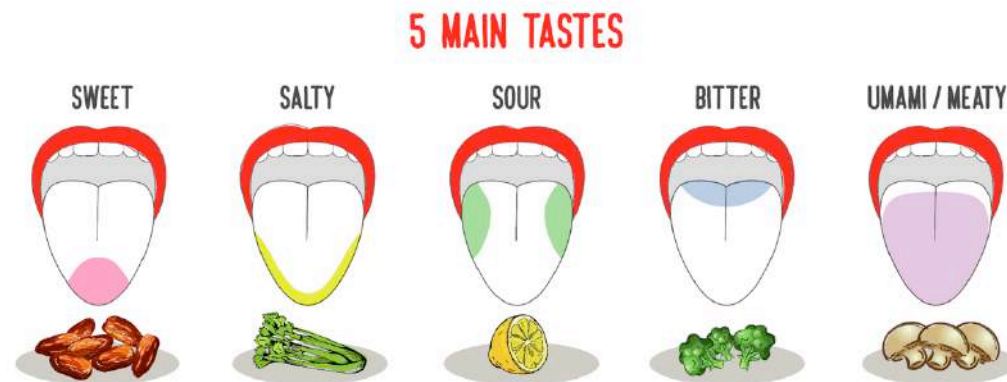


Here's an example of a meal planner you can build that takes into consideration the 3 different categories of food preferences to present to your child during each meal. To make it interactive you can have your child involved with you in deciding what goes on to his plate for the day! I used examples based on my 3 year-old daughters food preferences, but you can customize the table towards your own child's preferences and that can help you decide what's going on your plate.

<b>Category 1</b> (Safe/Neutral Foods) *Circle 1-2 options	Chicken	Chickpeas/ Hummus	Mulukhiya	Green Peas	Rice	Cucumber & Carrot Sticks	Pasta
<b>Category 2</b> (Favorite/Loved Foods) *Circle 1 option	Dates	Olives	Grapes	Fish	Toasted Brown Bread	Blueberries	Air Fried Potato Wedges
<b>Category 3</b> (New/Disliked Foods) *Circle 1 option	Salad	Steamed Broccoli	Cherry Tomatoes	Sautéed Green Beans	Lentil soup or Dhal	Brussel Sprouts	Avocado

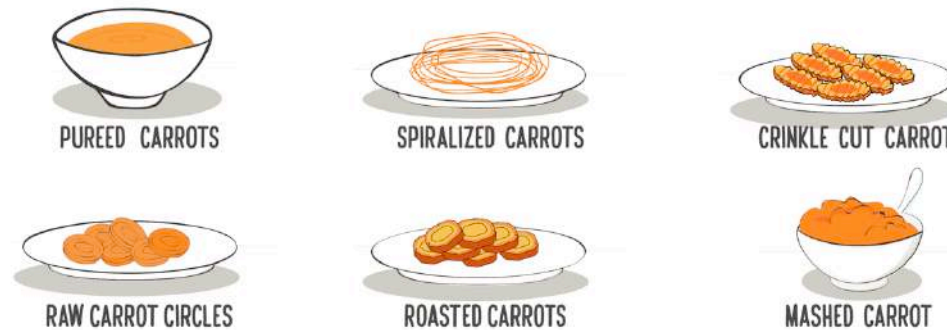
\*\*Please note that the general food groups (carbs, proteins, fruits, vegetables) are mixed and matched in each category based on the child's preference. To create a "balanced" meal, try to choose at least 1 protein rich food, 1 vegetable, 1 carbohydrate rich food. Do not worry about all the food categories coming into one meal, if you missed out on one food category make sure they your child gets it during snack time or his or her second meal!

### c) Work Creatively with Their Preferences



- Consider your child's preference in terms of *taste* and *texture*. Some children are drawn towards sweeter tasting foods, others prefer salty foods. If your child has more of a sweet tooth, consider roasting vegetables like carrots to bring out the sugars in them!

## PICKY EATER TIP: EXPLORE DIFFERENT TEXTURES!



- Texture is also very important, if it doesn't feel good in their mouth, they will most likely spit it out! Observe the different textures that your child enjoys and work with their preference. If they prefer smooth textures serve the vegetables pureed, if they are into crunchy foods give it to them raw!



The idea is to develop an understanding of what your child already likes and incorporate their preferences into their meals as you gradually encourage them to develop appreciation towards new flavors.

### 3. Turn the frown upside down before mealtime

Monitor your child's mood right before mealtime. If they are in a bad mood or feeling frustrated, they will be less interested and less likely to cooperate. It's not easy to always bring that boost of good energy to our children's environment, especially when we ourselves are feeling stressed and overwhelmed, so try and spend 15 minutes before meal time to turn that frown upside down. The goal is to bring your child to a relaxed, calm, and happy state so when they sit at the table, they are more likely to explore the foods on their plates.



## 4. Schedule & Routine

Make sure your child is feeling hungry when they sit at the table. A great advice to achieve this is to create a daily scheduled meal plan for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks. That way the child will have his meals at a scheduled time every day and begins to understand what to expect at mealtimes. Make sure your child doesn't have any food in between these scheduled meals to ensure the hunger hormones kick in. Typically, a toddler will have 3 main meals and 2 snacks daily with approximately 2-hour gap between their meals. The hungrier they are the more willing they will be to eat what's presented to them!

Meal	Time
Breakfast	07:30 am
Snack	10:00 am
Lunch	12:30 pm
Snack	03:00 pm
Dinner	06:00 pm



## 5. Avoid Power Struggles

It's important to realize that toddlers don't have a solid relationship with food, they are building it, and you (as a parent or caregiver) lead the way. The end goal is to create a healthy relationship with food where children enjoy, appreciate, and are willing to explore a variety of different healthy foods. As well as to avoid unhealthy food associations.





For example, if you pressure your child to finish the green beans on his plates, he will grow up feeling that green beans is a food he was forced to eat (develops a negative association with green beans; a health food). When the child is old enough to make his own food choices without constant monitoring, green beans will most likely be a food he resists due to his past negative association with it. As a child, there was a struggle whenever green beans were on the table!

On the other hand, using unhealthy foods as a form of reward can create a negative association with *unhealthy* foods. For example, your child wants chocolate and your reaction is (you can have chocolate after you: eat 3 more bites of your vegetables - do your homework - clean up your room). The child will associate chocolate with a sense of reward and accomplishment, or simply something that you eat when you want to feel good! When avoiding power struggles where you insist or bribe your child into eating you are taking a step towards preventing eating disorders that can carry on with your toddler into his adult years.

**So how do we deal with children who are rejecting healthy foods on their plate?**

Our primary job at this point is to change the eating environment from an environment of stress to an environment of peace.



This is when it's important to remember that you are *educating* your child about food. You are *teaching* them how to appreciate different tastes and how to eat a healthy and balanced meal, and your *language* is key to your success!

Refrain from negative statements and reframe your statements into something positive, neutral, and or can create a sense of future possibility



The table below provides a few examples of positive or neutral statements you can use whenever you are faced with food rejection from your child.



When you hear this...	Try saying this...
<b>I don't like it!</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You are still learning to like it. (Future possibility)</li> <li>- It takes time to learn to know if you like it or not. (Future possibility)</li> <li>- You mean you don't like it YET! (Future possibility)</li> <li>- I do! This is how I eat it! (Positive)</li> </ul>
<b>Ew!! Yucky!!</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- That's a different taste (Neutral)</li> <li>- How can we make it better? (Positive)</li> <li>- Why? (Neutral)</li> <li>- Oh! You don't like the way I cooked it this time. Maybe we can cook it differently next time and make it taste yummiier for you! (Future possibility)</li> </ul>
<b>I don't want to eat this! I want to eat</b> <i>(requests another food)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This is our dinner today, we can have (food that they requested) sometime soon. (future possibility)</li> </ul>

**if my child refuses to eat what's on the plate, should I just let him go hungry?**



This is when the power of providing a variety on their plate comes into power (present a food they like, a food they are neutral about, and a food you are trying to gain their acceptance towards). Encourage your children to try out the new foods (or rejected foods) by giving positive or neutral comments about that food and removing the stress and pressure of them having to eat it. If your child eats nothing at the table that's okay! Don't offer an alternative or blow your brains about it! Let them know that this is what's on the menu today and they don't have to eat it if they don't want to. They will eventually get hungry and at that point you can offer them other healthy options that provide nourishment and that they accept.



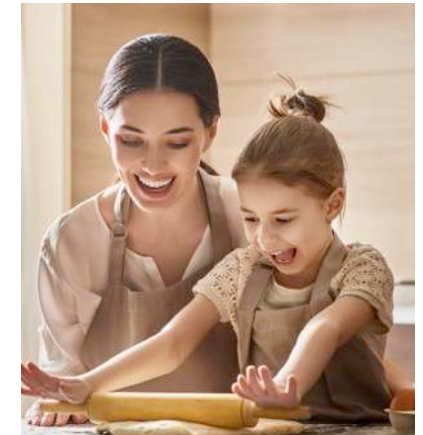
## 6. Be a Role Model

Children learn by example and love to copy! This is your opportunity to practice being a positive role model to your child in terms of healthy eating. When your child sees you eating and enjoying healthy foods, they are more likely to taste it and accept it themselves. Family mealtimes have a big impact on children's food choices later in life, and your reaction to specific foods will influence their own children's acceptance towards that food.



## 7. Encourage involvement and independence

Another thing children love doing is practice their independence! They love feeling like they are needed and that they are doing something important. Take them with you grocery shopping and have them help you pick out the vegetables and fruits you need! Get them involved in the kitchen by asking them to chop up some vegetables using safe utensils! Share some of the ingredients you are using for your meal and let them play with them and explore them to provide a sense of involvement. Plant a mini herb garden and teach them how plants grow and how to take care of them! All these activities will build up their curiosity towards new and different foods and encourage them to like them. It also provides deeper exposure where they are feeling, touching, smelling, and sometimes even tasting these foods bringing them closer towards acceptance and minimizing their rejection.



## 8. Celebrate Small Success

Don't be so hard on yourself! Remember that getting children to appreciate different foods and their flavors is a *process* and it takes *time*! If all they did was put the food in their mouth and spit it out or just lick it with their tongues and reject it, still consider it a success! At least you got them to taste it!! If they are used to throwing foods they don't like off the plate and you reach a point where they see the food and just ignore it (don't eat it but also don't throw it away) that's also a success! The rejection is less severe, and they are becoming more neutral about seeing foods they don't want! Remember to divide the responsibility, it is your responsibility as a parent or caregiver to constantly provide your child with healthy food options. It is the child's responsibility to decide what to do with the food you present them with. So, take the pressure off yourself and trust the journey will eventually lead you to where you want to be when practicing patience and using the right techniques towards getting your children acquainted with healthy foods!



We hope you found the information in this blog useful and motivates you to try different feeding approaches and techniques with your little ones!

*“Children are not things to be molded, they are people to be unfolded” – Jess Liar*

