



Parenting the Picky Eater to Make **Mealtime** More Enjoyable



Do you often find yourself suffering from “short-order cook syndrome,” preparing two or three different menus at mealtime to appease the desires of a finicky eater?

Mealtime should be a pleasant, relaxed family time and a positive environment where all family members can share what’s going on in their lives.

If your mealtimes usually end in arguments about what or how much your child should be eating, follow these guidelines. They’ll help you cope with your picky eater and help make family mealtime more enjoyable.

1. The first step is to eliminate the possibility that your child’s eating habits are caused by health problems. Make an appointment with your family pediatrician and share your concerns about your child’s appetite and eating habits. Ask the doctor to weigh and measure your child and have him or her show you how to plot out a standard growth chart. Assess your child’s growth and development over time, taking into consideration genetics and family body types. If your physician has no concerns, you can move on to other mealtime strategies without worry.
2. Establish rules for a family-style meal where everyone sits down together to eat. Turn the television off. Include all family members in the dinner table conversation, limiting adult-only conversation. Also, don’t use mealtime to nag or punish your child for behaviors that aren’t related to mealtime.
3. Establish a set of mealtime rules for your child. For example, he or she must stay seated, eat at the table, use his or her silverware, not throw food, etc.
4. Praise your child for any appropriate behaviors he or she uses during a meal, especially things like sampling new food items or foods he or she doesn’t prefer or like. Praise! Praise! Praise!
5. Don’t discuss eating habits or problems at or near mealtime. These discussions and related teaching should take place at other times. Do not bribe, threaten or scold your child over his or her eating habits at the dinner table. You can discuss mealtime rules, but do it before the meal begins. Also, keep discussions about the importance or

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value of a good diet or other food-related issues brief and to the point.

6. **Limit your child's eating time to 20 minutes.** If your child is going to eat, he or she will do so in the first 20 minutes of the meal. If your child finishes before that time, give praise and let him or her leave the table. (This decision depends on your mealtime rules.)
7. **Give your finicky eater small but reasonable portions of preferred foods along with very small amounts of nonpreferred foods.** Tell your child that he or she must eat the nonpreferred foods in order to have seconds of the preferred foods. Over time, gradually increase (or at least try to increase) the amount of nonpreferred foods you want your child to eat. Do not force your child to be a member of the "clean plate" club or to eat the nonpreferred foods.
8. **Plan your menus in advance.** Include your picky eater in this process, looking for opportunities to encourage him or her to try something new. Children's cookbooks are available to help with meal planning. Once you have created a menu, stick to your plan. Remember, you are not a short-order cook.
9. **Children should get in-between-meal snacks only if they finished their previous meal.** And desserts should be a reward for finishing lunch or dinner.
10. **Make mealtime a family affair.** All family members should follow the same eating and snacking rules you set for your finicky eater.
11. **Be sure to limit the amount of beverages your child drinks between meals** (do not limit water intake). Children should not drink juice, milk or other flavored liquids close to mealtime.
12. **Make mealtime fun by providing an occasional smorgasbord of favorite foods.** The more fun mealtime is, the more invested your finicky eater will be in participating and trying new foods.
13. **Final Step: Provide numerous opportunities for your child to learn how to manage "inconveniences"**

(like trying new foods!). This can be accomplished by having him or her do new chores, decreasing TV or computer time and increasing expectations for good behavior.

Final Reminders

- **Don't worry.** Parents of a finicky eater often worry that their child will starve or not grow or develop normally. Starvation should not be a concern just because your child hasn't eaten a vegetable or fruit in the past six weeks. If your child receives good medical attention and is in good health, there shouldn't be anything to worry about. Your child's ultimate height and body weight is more a function of the genes you have donated to him or her than what you serve at meals. The next time you are at a family gathering, take an inventory of the variety of body shapes and sizes.
- **Assemble a support group for your child** and enroll grandparents, daycare providers, your pediatrician and other family members as participants.
- **Bribery and forcing your child to eat will get you nowhere.** If you push, the results will probably be unhappy meals and family relationships, and increased defiance. So be firm and consistent in your parenting style, but not overbearing.

Bon appetit!

Additional Resources

- ***Coping with a Picky Eater: A Guide for the Perplexed Parent*** by William G. Wilkoff
- ***Help! There's a Toddler in the House!*** by Thomas M. Reimers, Ph.D.

➡ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

