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Children's nutrition: 10 tips for picky eaters

Has your preschooler refused to eat anything other than chicken nuggets for the past two days? Or would your toddler rather play than eat anything at all?

If children's nutrition is a sore topic in your household, you're not alone. Many parents worry about what their children eat — and don't eat. However, most kids get plenty of variety and nutrition in their diets over the course of a week. Until your child's food preferences mature, consider these tips for preventing mealtime battles.

1. Respect your child's appetite — or lack of one

If your child isn't hungry, don't force a meal or snack. Likewise, don't bribe or force your child to eat certain foods or clean his or her plate. This might only ignite — or reinforce — a power struggle over food. In addition, your child might come to associate mealtime with anxiety and frustration. Serve small portions to avoid overwhelming your child and give him or her the opportunity to independently ask for more.

2. Stick to the routine

Serve meals and snacks at about the same times every day. Provide juice or milk with the food, and offer water between meals and snacks. Allowing your child to fill up on juice or milk throughout the day might decrease his or her appetite for meals.

3. Be patient with new foods

Young children often touch or smell new foods, and may even put tiny bits in their mouths and then take them back out again. Your child might need repeated exposure to a new food before he or she takes the first bite. Encourage your child by talking about a food's color, shape, aroma and texture — not whether it tastes good. Serve new foods along with your child's favorite foods.

4. Make it fun

Serve broccoli and other veggies with a favorite dip or sauce. Cut foods into various shapes with cookie cutters. Offer breakfast foods for dinner. Serve a variety of brightly colored foods.

5. Recruit your child's help

At the grocery store, ask your child to help you select fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods. Don't buy anything that you don't want your child to eat. At home, encourage your child to help you rinse veggies, stir batter or set the table.

6. Set a good example

If you eat a variety of healthy foods, your child is more likely to follow suit.

7. Be creative

Add chopped broccoli or green peppers to spaghetti sauce, top cereal with fruit slices, or mix grated zucchini and carrots into casseroles and soups.

8. Minimize distractions

Turn off the television and other electronic gadgets during meals. This will help your child focus on eating. Keep in mind that television advertising might also encourage your child to desire sugary foods.

9. Don't offer dessert as a reward

Withholding dessert sends the message that dessert is the best food, which might only increase your child's desire for sweets. You might select one or two nights a week as dessert nights, and skip dessert the rest of the week — or redefine dessert as fruit, yogurt or other healthy choices.

10. Don't be a short-order cook

Preparing a separate meal for your child after he or she rejects the original meal might promote picky eating. Encourage your child to stay at the table for the designated mealtime — even if he or she doesn't eat. Keep serving your child healthy choices until they become familiar and preferred.

If you're concerned that picky eating is compromising your child's growth and development, consult your child's doctor.



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Healthy snacks for kids: 10 child-friendly tips

Healthy snacks for kids don't have to be dull. Consider 10 tips for quick-and-healthy snacks.

Snacking is a major pastime for many kids — and that's not necessarily bad. Nutritious snacking can help your child curb hunger throughout the day, as well as provide energy and important nutrients. Find out how to make healthy snacks for kids.

- **Keep junk food out of the house**

Your child won't clamor for cookies, candy bars or chips if you don't keep them on hand. Set a good example by choosing healthy snacks yourself.

- **Go for the grain**

Whole-grain foods — such as whole-grain pretzels or tortillas and high-fiber, whole-grain cereals — provide energy with some staying power.

- **Mix and match**

Serve baby carrots or other raw veggies with fat-free ranch dressing or hummus. Dip graham cracker sticks or fresh fruit in fat-free yogurt. Spread peanut butter on celery, apples or bananas.

- **Broaden the menu**

Offer out-of-the-usual fare, such as pineapple, cranberries, red or yellow peppers, mangoes, tangelos or roasted soy nuts.

- **Revisit breakfast**

Serve breakfast foods — such as scrambled eggs and whole-grain toast — as healthy snacks for kids in the afternoon.

- **Sweeten it up**

Healthy snacks for kids don't have to be bland. To satisfy your child's sweet tooth, offer fat-free pudding, frozen yogurt or frozen fruit bars. Make smoothies with skim milk, fat-free yogurt, and fresh or frozen fruit.

- **Have fun**

Use a cookie cutter to make shapes out of low-fat cheese slices, whole-grain bread or whole-grain tortillas. Make fruit kebabs or show your child how to eat diced fruit with chopsticks. Make a tower out of whole-grain crackers, spell words with pretzel sticks, or make funny faces on a plate using different types of fruit.

- **Promote independence**

Keep a selection of ready-to-eat veggies in the refrigerator. Leave fresh fruit in a bowl on the counter. Store low-sugar, whole-grain cereal and fruit canned or packaged in its own juice in an easily accessible cabinet.

- **Don't be fooled by labeling gimmicks**

Foods marketed as low-fat or fat-free can still be high in calories and sodium. Likewise, foods touted as cholesterol-free can still be high in fat, saturated fat and sugar. Check nutrition labels to find out the whole story.

- **Designate a snacking zone**

Restrict snacking to certain areas, such as the kitchen. You'll save your child countless calories from mindless munching in front of the TV. If your child needs to snack on the go, offer string cheese, yogurt sticks, cereal bars, a banana or other drip-free items.

Teaching your child to make healthy snack choices now will help set the stage for a lifetime of healthy eating. Start today.