

The Picky Eater

Picky eating is a normal behavior in children. Some children develop this behavior as early as birth, while other children periodically choose their favorite food. Some picky eaters are naturally sensitive to food texture and smell. Others choose not to eat certain foods because of unfamiliarity. In child care, this behavior can be a challenge for teachers and parents. Teachers must make mealtimes both enjoyable and pleasant to promote healthy eating habits for picky eaters.

The Environment

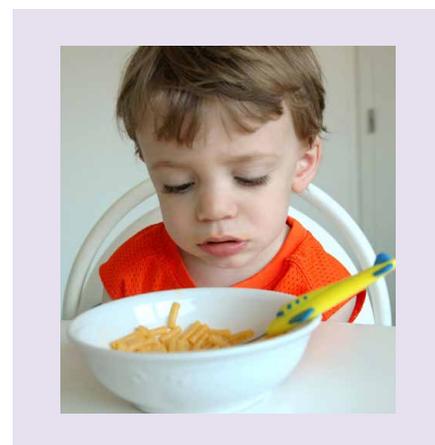
Developing healthy eating habits can be a challenge when working with children. Teachers must create an environment that is warm and welcoming to children. All distractions should be eliminated; turn off all music, television, and put away all toys. Teachers should show excitement and enthusiasm towards mealtimes. The more involved the teacher is in creating a pleasant environment, the higher the chances are of implementing healthy eating habits.

Mealtime is a time for children to share responsibilities with their friends and teachers. A routine should be followed at every meal, so children are aware and know what to expect during mealtime. Family style dining is highly recommended; it implements both social and motor skills. Respect should be given to all children to maintain a pleasant environment.

Food Behaviors

Food jag is a key behavior for some picky eaters. Food jag is when a child will only eat a particular item for all meals. Children that eat the same food, prepared the same way, during each meal is a sure sign of food jag. For example, Little Sara only eats macaroni and cheese for each meal. Children begin to food jag because of several different reasons. Reasons may include intensive sensitivity to flavor, food boredom, a self-rule attitude, and the fear of trying new foods.

Reluctance to try new foods may be due to a variety of reasons. Temperament may be an issue that causes children to be picky eaters. Temperament ranges from children being very easy to extremely



cautious or challenging, which may cause picky eating. Phenylthiocarbamide or PTC may also have an impact on children. PTC is a chemical in some food that causes a bitter taste. Some foods that include PTC are cabbage, strawberries, and green apples. Foods that have PTC should be introduced gradually. There are many behaviors that cause children to be picky eaters, but the key to overcoming this time in a child's life is patience.

Strategies to Success

- Create and maintain a routine that is warm and inviting
- Set an example for children
- Introduce brightly colored menu items, such as oranges, green apples, macaroni and cheese
- Utilize Family Style Dining

Strategies to Success (continued)

- Be patient during the exploration of trying new foods and do not give up
- Provide praise for trying (i.e. trying one bite, smelling, feeling the food)
- Limit the offering of new foods to one new food at a time.



Things to Avoid

Applying Force– During mealtimes, children should not be forced to eat. Forcing children to eat can have a negative long-term effect. It is okay for a child to choose not to eat a menu item. The goal is to encourage each child to try new foods.

Bribery – A child should never be bribed to eat a meal. Bribing promotes picky eating. Bribing or promising rewards introduces the concept of deal making. Making deals with children to eat certain foods only sets the child up for failure. Children develop the idea that undesirable food can only be eaten after an agreement or arrangement has been made.

Short-hand Cook – A Short-hand cook is a cook that prepares meals as ordered or by demand. Short-hand cooks boost picky eating. If a child has the option to choose all meals, it can cause a health risk and serious problems in the future. Short-hand cooking leads to children eating unhealthy meals. Children have the tendency to eat what they prefer, not always what is healthy.

Sources

Hendrix, M. (2008). Picky eaters. *Exchange*, 180, 90-93.

Robertson, C. (2009). *Safety, nutrition, and health in early education*. Belmont, Ca: Wadsworth.



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Key Things to Remember

Picky eating cannot be corrected overnight. Healthy eating habits can be implemented through consistency and persistence. Teachers must understand that children control their own eating habits. Teachers control what and where each child should eat. But, teachers do not control how much or how little a child will eat. Teachers should remain consistent and positive and understand the temperaments and personalities of each child. Then teachers can guide children to healthy eating habits.

Picky Eater Games

1. **I Did, I Did Game** – When a child tries a new food for the first time, he says, “I Did, I Did”. The teacher provides praise, high-five, etc. The key to this game is to praise children for trying new food. Most children want to please their teacher and friends. If their friends are receiving praise, this motivates them to complete the same task to obtain praise. Children are trying new foods and receiving praise, which is a happy mealtime.

2. **My New Treat Game**– During mealtime, if there is an item that is new to a child, introduce the “My New Treat Game”. Teachers play the guessing game with the entire class during mealtime. Ask a variety of questions about the new item. The key is to capture children’s interest in the new foods, and then encourage them in trying the new food.