

Healthy Eating with a “Choosy” Eater

“Choosy” Eating

Often, choosy eating is a sign your child is growing up and becoming more independent. What seems like being “choosy” may just be your child’s first steps in learning to make their own decisions. Learn how to handle eating challenges and avoid conflict so meals don’t become a battle of control.

Tips and Ideas

What do you do if your child refuses a whole meal because something they don’t like touched their plate? What about if they refuse to eat anything other than fruit, and two days ago would only eat peanut butter sandwiches? What if your child is not showing any interest in food at all?

These behaviors are not uncommon. Here are ten tips for handling a “choosy” eater and making mealtimes more pleasant again:

1. Treat food jags casually. A food jag is when a child eats only a certain food for a period of time. They usually do not last long.
2. Look at what a child eats over several days, instead of over one day or per meal. Most kids are eating more variety than you think.
3. Trust your child’s appetite. Forcing a child to eat more than they want can cause conflict and lead to overeating.
4. Set reasonable time limits for the start and end of a meal, and then quietly remove the plate.
5. Stay positive and avoid criticizing or calling a child a “picky eater.” Children believe what we say, and they could start to reflect that behavior out of their own beliefs.
6. Serve food plain and respect the “no foods touching” rule if that’s important to your child. This will pass in time.
7. Avoid being a short-order cook. Make and offer the same food for the whole family. Aim for at least one food everyone will eat.
8. Substitute a similar food if a child does not like a certain food. For example, instead of squash, offer sweet potatoes.
9. Provide just two or three choices, not a huge array of food. Then, let your child decide. Keep in mind that your child may choose nothing, and that is okay!
10. Focus on your child’s positive eating behavior, not on the food itself.

Final Considerations

If you are concerned about your child's weight or eating habits, consult your pediatrician. For more information about healthy eating and active living resources, please email 5210healthywashoe@nnph.org

The contents of this document were adapted from "Nibbles for Health" Nutrition Newsletter for Parents of Young Children, USDA Food and Nutrition Service.