



PICKY EATING PROBLEMS

By Judy Arnall

Babies eat more food relative to weight in the first year, compared to any other year of their life. By age one, food consumption drastically reduces. Babies triple their birth weight in the first year, and toddlers only gain five pounds in the second year. If you can get one good meal into a toddler in a day, you are doing very well! (And it probably will be breakfast or lunch; they are falling apart by dinner.)

It helps to think about the division of responsibilities between parent and child. The feeding relationship helps to lesson the need to bargain, bribe, and punish a child to get them to eat. It teaches the child healthier eating habits by getting them attuned to how much their stomach feels hungry, rather than eating according to a clock. It allows for healthier social eating relationships where attendance in a group eating situation is encouraged and not grazing.

According to an informal poll of my parenting groups, about 25 to 30 percent of parents feel their toddlers are picky eaters. Toddlers are definitely more interested in exploring than eating, so more food may be on them, the tray and the floor than in their tummies! That's okay. It's just a stage.

The Feeding Relationship

The parent's job

What: The parent controls what food is bought, stored, cooked, and served. Parents control the money and shopping at this age and make most decisions of what to buy.

When: The parent decides when snack and meal times will be. Toddler's tummies are about the size of a ping pong ball, and they need food and drink every two hours. Three meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and three snacks: mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and bedtime per day is recommended. The parent keeps the food on the table for 20 minutes and then puts the food away until the next scheduled meal or snack. The parent doesn't punish the child for not eating by serving the same food over and over until it gets eaten.

Where: The parent decides where eating and drinking will take place. Eating at the table should be encouraged to minimize the risk of choking while running, walking, or climbing. It's also a good habit to get into, as non-aware eating can lead to weight issues. When children eat while watching movies, playing video games, or computers, they are not consciously enjoying the food or even paying attention to what they are eating. Although, I have noticed you can easily slip a plate of raw vegetables and dip under their noses while they are playing video games and the whole plate is gone in minutes. I don't even think they notice what they just ate!

The child's job

If: The child decides if he will eat, according to his internal hunger cues rather than the clock or schedule. A meal is only a small part of the day's food intake – only 1/6. If your child chooses not to eat, don't worry. He will make up for it at some time later in the day, next day, or in a few days.

How much: The child decides what quantity will satisfy his hunger. This also helps him decide his internal cues.

More Eating Tips

- Food jags are normal, where the child eats nothing but peanut butter and jam sandwiches for three weeks or a longer period of time. That's okay. As long as it's a healthy food, don't worry about their nutritional intake. Most parents who worried about nutrition, found that their toddlers did eat a variety of foods when they kept a log of their food intake over a week or two week period.

- It takes 15 tries to accept a new food. Have a one bite routine – try one bite (the no-thank-you bite) and see if your child likes it. If they don't, let them spit it out onto the "no-thank you" plate. Don't turn the one bite routine into a power struggle. Young children have very sensitive taste buds and they definitely will change overtime. Toddlers like to feel like they are getting something special. Presentation is everything. Vegetables and fruits arranged in a face will appeal to them when a regular tossed salad is ignored.
- Toddlers usually don't eat much at dinner. They are tired and cranky at the end of the day. Track their lunch and breakfast intake.
- Toddlers usually prefer finger type foods.
- To save time, don't use dishes. Put the food right on the tray. Then the plate won't be thrown.
- Give baby a spoon for each hand and then you can feed him with a separate spoon. It keeps his hands busy.
- Give a butter spreader to help preschoolers cut food.
- Let a toddler practice drinking from a sippy cup in the bathtub.
- Fill toddler glasses only one third full, and make sure all dishes are plastic.
- Cool hot food by dumping in an ice cube.
- Be aware of micro-waving mugs with the attached plastic straws on the outside.
- The liquid in the straw heats first and can cause burns because the toddler drinks it first.
- For fun, serve food on doll or play dishes.
- Think variety: fill an ice cream cone with egg salad, tuna salad, pudding, or yogurt for easy eating.
- Use the football hold to help get the toddler to the sink and use your other hand to splash water on his chin and guide his arms under the sink to wash. Store clean shirts in the kitchen to save running to the bedroom after meal times. Wash food encrusted shirts within a day or two or the food will become moldy.
- Clean highchairs and strollers in the shower. Run water and let the encrusted food soften. Works as well outside in the summer with the hose.
- Dumping, mushing, and throwing food are exploratory behaviors. A little food exploration is part of development. When the food deliberately hits the walls, or the food exploration is testing your patience on a stressful day, it's a signal that mealtime is over. Remove your child from the eating place.
- If the toddler doesn't sit still at mealtime, schedule a burn up activity right before mealtime, and they will have used up some energy. Before a restaurant visit, go to a playground. In fact, this works well for any event that requires a certain amount of sit still time: weddings, church, movies, concerts. Be thankful for 5 – 15 minutes, as this is all you might get!
- Let them feed themselves with non-messy foods like peas and bread pieces while you can still feed the messy stuff with the spoon.
- Try serving finger foods with dip or sauce. All children love sauces to swirl.

- Serve mini portions of old favorites: pancakes, muffins, meatballs.
- Let them pour their own juice using the dishwasher door as a counter surface.
- Then you can just close the door after they spill and the mess goes into the dishwasher.
- Serve a tray of carrot sticks, broccoli florets, red pepper, and salad dressing as you are getting dinner ready. Guaranteed it will be gone!
- You can pretend to sprinkle sugar over the cereal and nobody will notice the difference. Just wave your spoon over and your toddler will think you put sugar and salt on their food.
- Young children tend to like their food separated. Avoid casseroles if possible.
- Serve dessert along with the meal. Don't elevate the status of dessert as more desirable by declaring it the prize for eating the lesser-valued dinner items.
- Purée vegetables to hide in soups and sauces.
- Make sure dessert is healthy. Fruit, yogurt, ice-cream and oatmeal cookies are all very healthy choices and part of a balanced diet.
- Avoid classifying food into "good" and "bad" categories. Use "more nutritious" and "less nutritious" so you get your child into the habit of making better food choice decisions.
- Avoid punishing or rewarding a child with food items.
- Treats are occasional foods. They wouldn't be called treats if they were served every day. Designate a treat day.
- Avoid bargaining using food. Parents who say, "Eat four more bites of your hamburger and then you can have your toy," are setting themselves up for power struggles. Children learn very quickly that parents want them to eat, and by refusing, they can get attention and control. Give children attention for positive behavior and control in the form of choices. Don't make eating a power struggle.
- Preserve the social function of food. A comforting, social, happy atmosphere at meal and snack time and a wide variety of healthy foods is all that's needed for childhood nutrition.

Judy Arnall is a professional international award-winning *Parenting Speaker*, and Trainer, Mom of five children, and author of the best-selling, "***Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery***" She specializes in "**Parenting the Digital Generation**" www.judyarnall.com (403) 714-6766 jarnall@shaw.ca

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