

Tips for Providers: Picky Eating

Picky eating is very common among children. It usually means that they want to make some choices on their own. There is nothing wrong with picky eaters. They just need some extra care at mealtimes. Use these tips to help children eat well.



1 Be a Role Model.

Staff in the center or home should eat the same meal at the same time together. Children watch and learn from others. The children watch you eat beets and enjoy them, which may make them want to try the beets too.

2 Turn Off all Media.

TVs, cell phones, video games, computers, and radios distract children during meals. Children who focus only on eating at mealtimes do much better in school than children distracted by media. Take time to interact with the children and enjoy eating together.

3 Offer Routine Meals.

The staff and the children have a role to play at mealtimes. The staff serves healthy meals and snacks at the same scheduled times every day. The children decide whether or not to eat the food served. It is okay for children not to eat a certain snack or meal. They will get hungry and decide to eat at the next scheduled meal or snack time.

4 Make One Meal.

Encourage parents to make the same meal for all family members including the picky eater. It is helpful if parents include their child in meal planning by allowing the child to choose a healthy entrée for dinner such as veggie lasagna or a bean burrito. Stick to offering two possible healthy meal choices and prepare one meal for everyone in the family.

5 Provide Praise.

Try to keep mealtimes positive. Provide praise to the children when they eat well or try a new food. A high five, hug, or pat on the back works well. You could use a sticker chart to record the number of times children try a new food. Forcing or bribing the children to eat does not work. Avoid using dessert as a reward for eating well. It gives dessert foods more value than mealtime foods and makes picky eating continue.

6 Sip Smart.

Children can fill up their small tummies very easily with too many drinks and not be hungry. Milk or water is the best drink choice. However, children only need around two cups of milk total per day. 100 percent fruit juice is fine once or twice a week served in a small half cup glass. Avoid serving soda, fruit drinks, punch, or other sweetened drinks to the children.

7 Talk about Food.

Talk to the children about preparing healthy meals and setting the table. Explain to the children where food grows, how we cook it, and why it is healthy. Teaching children where their food comes from will spark their interest in trying the food.

8 Be Patient.

Picky eaters will take time to change their behavior. Continue to serve and eat healthy foods with the children. It takes children up to 10 times of trying a food before they decide they like it. Picky eaters are easily overwhelmed, so serve small portions and give children enough time to eat at mealtimes.