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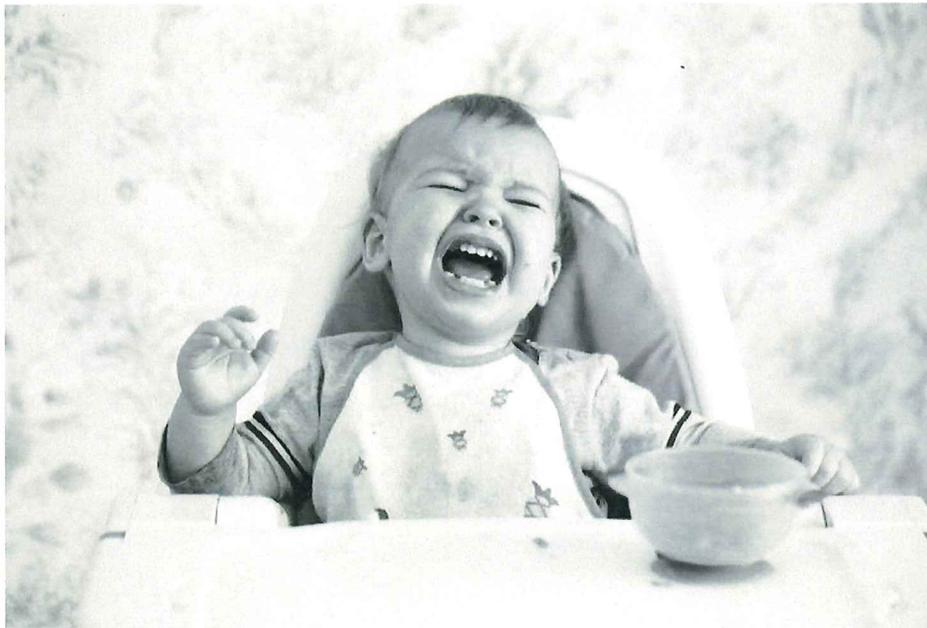
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# Research-Based Mealtime Hacks for "Picky" Eaters

Physical Health & Nutrition

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Here's what the research says about teaching our littlest food critics to try new foods.

"Picky" eating behavior — being unwilling to try new or non-favorite foods — usually starts at about two years of age. This is the same time toddlers begin to establish their independence in other areas of their lives (not wanting to take a bath, hold hands in a parking lot, sit in the grocery cart, etc.). It's also a point when their weight gain — which

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was rapid over the first two years — is starting to slow, so toddlers experience a decreased appetite. This is why picky eating is more of a typical milestone than a challenging behavior.

## One way of thinking about feeding

Dealing with picky eaters can sometimes feel stressful, frustrating, annoying, and worrisome—all in the same meal. It can help to think about what you and your child are responsible for when it comes to mealtime:

It's a parent's job to provide a variety of healthy foods in age-appropriate servings at mealtimes and snack times.

It's the child's job to decide what, and how much, to eat.

This approach takes a lot of the emotion, stress, and struggle out of feeding. It seems so simple, but does it work? Yes. A research study found that children who weren't pressured about what/how much they ate actually ate more than the children in the study who were pressured to eat.

## Mealtime hacks for picky eaters

So, what does the research say about teaching our littlest food critics to try new foods? Here are some tips to try with your family.

- 1. Pair new foods with familiar ones.** If your toddler loves ketchup but isn't sure about brussels sprouts, pull off the leaves of one sprout to make it easier for your toddler to dip and eat. (My daughter will eat almost anything dipped in ketchup.)
- 2. Serve one food item at each meal that you know your child likes.** Children build on the familiar and preferred foods they know best.
- 3. Start small!** Want to introduce spinach to your child? Try not to plop a big spoonful on your child's plate. Start with one tiny leaf and work up from there.
- 4. Use positive peer pressure.** Research shows that children are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables if they see their parents eat them. Another study of preschoolers found that children were more likely to prefer foods they saw other children eat.
- 5. Nobody likes to be forced to eat.** Ditch the “clean your plate” rule and forget the “two more bites to get dessert” bribe. When children learn what “full” feels like and decide when to stop eating on their own, they are more likely to maintain a healthy weight over the long-term.
- 6. Don't give up.** You may have heard that it can take between 10-15 tries with a new food before a child will eat it. So—sigh—hang in there. It'll happen eventually.
- 7. Schedule mealtimes.** Plan for three meals a day and two snacks at pretty consistent times. This helps to ensure that children are hungry when it's time to eat, making it more likely they'll try new foods that are offered.

**8. Talk to your health care provider about how much (and what kind of) liquids your child needs each day.** Avoid letting children fill up on milk or juice—this can make them less hungry for food at mealtimes.

**9. Little kids, little tummies: keep serving sizes right for their age.** Offer age-appropriate portions: about a tablespoon of each food for each year of your child’s age. So, if you have a two-year-old, you would offer two tablespoons of each food served.

**10. Let it end.** Mealtimes for toddlers and preschoolers shouldn’t be longer than 15-20 minutes. Let children play nearby while you finish up.

**11. Give fruits and veggies better names.** A study recently tested whether fun names (like “power punch broccoli”) made vegetables more appealing to elementary school students. Answer: Yes. Case in point—when my son was three, he loved ham and hated turkey. Calling deli turkey “white ham” was a game changer!

**12. Make mealtime a positive experience.** Turn off screens. Talk to one another. Tell stories. Ask questions: what’s your child favorite color, favorite animal?

**13. Food prep is fun—give children a way to help out.** The more children touch and help prepare foods (especially fruits and veggies), the more likely they are to choose them later as a snack.

For more guidance on picky eating, see [How to Handle a Picky Eater](https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1072-how-to-handle-picky-eaters) (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1072-how-to-handle-picky-eaters>).

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