



## I hate peas!!!

*Battling with a picky eater at mealtimes is no fun for anyone. Sheena Hendon discusses the various causes of fussy eating and what you can do to have your child develop healthy eating habits for life.*

**Put up your hands if your child is a picky eater?** Perhaps your child won't eat meat or hates peas, loves milk over any kind of food or has a limited food repertoire. You will be pleased to know that most parents at one time or another have some concerns about their children's eating habits. Chat to parents at a barbecue and you will invariably hear someone talking about a fussy eater in their family. "He eats fruit but won't touch veggies." "Mealtimes in our house are such a chore that I have resorted to letting him eat what he likes..."

Learning to eat and love food is one of those things that can take time and patience. Eating is the most complex, physical task humans engage in. It uses all the body's organ systems; the brain and cranial nerves, heart and vascular systems, respiratory, endocrine and metabolic systems, all the muscles of the body and the entire GI tract. No wonder it takes a bit of getting used to.

Yet, saying that the majority of children I see for eating problems are due to behavioural rather than physical issues and that is why we as caregivers have a major role encouraging healthy eating habits from day one.

### **Is my child really picky?**

The first question to ask is do I really need to worry? Ask yourself, is my child happy most of the time, energetic, thriving and gaining weight and height, active and interested and communicating well? Yes? Then relax, he is normal.

If you are still concerned then try this exercise. Write down all the foods your child will eat - bananas, apples, yogurt, bread, crackers, mince, chicken, fish, cheese and so forth. As a rule of thumb, if a toddler eats less than 30 different foods he is fussy and you may need to do some work at home on developing some healthy eating habits. If he has a repertoire of less than 20 different food types, there may be a problem and it is worth consulting a health professional.

### **What could be causing fussy eating?**

The first things you can check is the environment. Eating in a noisy, busy or stressful environment can put your child off his food. Eating or drinking when lying down, walking around or in a chair without adequate support under your child's feet can also be a problem.

Next observe any physical issues. Signs of a problem with **oral motor skills** such as sucking, swallowing, biting or chewing may include loud, gulpy swallowing, coughing, a weak suck or chewing ability, heavy drooling, breathing problems

or gagging whilst eating. If your child has **fine motor skill challenges** and is unable to hold utensils well or grasp a drinking cup this can lead to your child favouring foods that are easier to pick up with her hands.

**Nutrition and digestive issues** such as reflux, food allergies or intolerances can cause discomfort and even pain during or after eating certain foods and lack of minerals can lead to loss of appetite, poor assimilation of foods, vomiting and reflux.

Now let's take a look at some behavioural issues or disorders which may be present.

**Sensory processing disorder** is a neurological condition where children often have a difficult time touching, let alone eating a food because the texture, smell or feel of it in their hands or mouth is unpleasant to them. Minor food preferences such as preferring apples over grapes should not be confused with this disorder and are nothing to worry about.

Offering the same foods to your child day after day can lead to **food jags**, which are periods of time (days or even weeks) when your child will eat only one or two foods and often occur during toddlerhood because the foods they will eat are ones they are comfortable with. Allowing child to continue on a food jag can cause him to develop a restrictive food repertoire, which puts him at risk for nutritional deficiencies and poor growth.

**Behaviour is linked to beliefs** and at an early age children can pick up cues from adults that can last a lifetime, such as vegetables are horrid or chocolate is a reward.

Eating problems around the ages of two and three are often associated with power and control. Control is a developmental stage for this age group who are realising that they can make their own decisions. The more you try and impose rules and regulations on eating and table manners, the clearer it becomes to the toddler that the meal table is one place she can always get your attention and concern. Pre-schoolers are also learning how to eat and there are many spills and messes. These mistakes are not misbehaviours.

***TIP: Most children will be getting an adequate intake and most feeding problems resolve with time but for some children they can become a long term problem and affect growth. So if you are at all worried, keep a written record of what they are eating for a few days (without them knowing). Usually you will find they are getting enough – but if you are still worried talk to a nutritionist, dietitian or family coach.***

#### **Tips for developing healthy eating habits**

- Eat in a calm setting without TV or other distractions, have your child seated appropriately and make mealtimes pleasant occasions.
- Set up rules around food and eating for your house as early as possible, discuss these rules with your babies and children and most importantly stick to them.
- Be a great role model. Always talk about food in a positive way. For example; we eat healthy foods like vegetables to run fast. Show your kids that you find eating fun and pleasurable.

- Be consistent. Eat all meals, even snacks sitting down at a table. Get into a routine with regular family mealtimes, including morning and afternoon snacks with no snacking in between and all meals eaten at the table. This will help kids to pick up good eating habits as well as being a great time to get the family to communicate with each other.
- Provide variety including different meal ideas, food types, flavours, textures and colour. No child is going to enjoy food if the same old thing is put in front of them everyday and offering different foods enables your kids to get their full quota of nutrients.
- Give your child choice. For example; which two vegetables would you like; squares or triangles; marmite or honey; mashed or whole potatoes.
- Offer your child small portions so that they do not feel overwhelmed by a large plate of food.
- Filling up on fluid may mean there is no room left for food in their small stomachs so limit drinks between meals to water and don't give any fluid for half an hour or so before a meal.
- Mix food favourites with those not so favourite, and introduce vegetables as a component of a food such as adding grated carrot to meat hot pot or peas to potato fritters.
- Try not to rush meals. However do not extend the time of the meal in the hope your child will eat more. Limit meal times to 20-30 minutes and take away food uneaten without comment. Do not offer alternative foods if the meal is not eaten.
- Getting your kids involved in shopping, preparation and cooking is one sure way to get kids interested in eating well. Even two year olds can mix the muffin mixture or arrange a cut tomato on a plate. Older kids can help make muffins, put together their own hamburgers or add toppings to pizza. Let children go and find shopping items for you whilst at the supermarket, ask their advice on which foods to buy, let them help pack/unpack the shopping and give them responsibilities around setting the table.

Last but not least if you practise consistency and patience you are well on your way to developing family healthy eating habits. Remember if one meal turns into a disaster, don't give up. Put it behind you and approach the next meal positively.

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