

# peaceful mealtimes

## *from yucky to yummy - helping your picky eater*

Do power struggles over food often spoil your mealtime? Fear not! You can learn to avoid fights and your kids can eat healthy food. The key to taking the wind out of your kids' "picky eater" sails is to learn to do your responsibility well, and let your children be responsible for their intake.

Try to remember this simple rule:

***Parents are responsible for what is presented and the way it is presented.  
Children are responsible for how much and even whether they eat!\****

The ideas in each category are ordered from general suggestions to those appropriate for very picky eaters.

### **Offer many HEALTHY FOODS**

- **Provide variety.** Children need repeated exposure to a variety of nutritional food. At the store, remember: If you don't want your children to eat it, don't buy it.
- **Serve small portions.** Young children are easily overwhelmed by large chunks or portions.
- **Limit drinks with calories.** Offer mostly water between meals. (Limit juice/milk.)
- **Don't reward with dessert.** Rewarding vegetable eating with dessert, for example, gives a strong message: the sweets are "yummy" and the vegetables are "yucky." Instead just have dessert once or twice a week as a regular part of a meal – whether kids finish their vegetables or not.
- **Include one preferred food,** but refuse to "special order cook"! At each meal include one food you know your child will eat, sampling some yourself. Create an "our food" mentality, not "my food, your food."
- **Modify favorite foods.** If your child is a strongly picky eater and wants only a few certain foods, serve them only once every other day and modify them slightly in size, shape, color, flavor, etc. – just enough so that your child will notice, but not get upset. This builds flexibility in eating as you gradually increase the variety.

\*Ellen Slater, [How To Get Your Kids to Eat: But Not Too Much](#)

## Create an ENJOYABLE MEALTIME Environment

- **Have regular sit-down family meals**, with positive conversation and atmosphere and no TV or distractions.
- **Refuse to engage in power struggles** related to what or how much your child chooses to eat.
- **Pass food.** When capable, children should be encouraged to pass food and place servings on their own plates.
- **Allow messiness/play.** For young children: allow/encourage some messiness and playful exploration of food, especially at snacks. Exploring and playing with food is an important part of development in which children learn about food and learn to enjoy it.
- **Talk about your enjoyment of the food.** Describe the food's size, color, shape, texture, smell, taste, etc. In a relaxed way, talk about why you enjoy it, and how it is similar to a food which your child accepts.

## Use POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

- **Use "You can" language.** As often as possible, replace demands or questions (such as "Can you \_\_\_\_?") with "You can \_\_\_\_\_." i.e. "You can try that new food." "NO!" "You can when you're ready."
- **State the rules in a neutral way.** Whenever possible avoid saying "Stop," "Don't," or "No" at meals. Instead state rules regarding appropriate behavior in specific terms, i.e. "The food stays on the table," "Chairs are for sitting not standing," "We use our inside voices at the table."
- **Gently affirm sampling of new foods.** Do not pressure, manipulate, reward or excessively praise children for eating. These tactics imply children wouldn't naturally want to eat the food, i.e. there's something wrong with it. Observations like, "I see you tried something new," or "We're both eating our peas," are helpful. Your child should realize he is eating something of his own choice, not to please you.
- **Teach your children the "10 Times Rule"** – Research shows that it takes about 10x's of trying a food to know if you like it.

Research consistently shows that attempts to make children eat certain foods are more harmful than helpful. One study even revealed that children who were rewarded for eating a new food were less likely to eat it the next time it was served, than were children who were simply presented the food! So how can parents encourage children to eat a greater variety of healthy food? The answer: do your responsibility well, and don't take over your child's responsibility!

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## *practical tips for squirmy youngsters*

Children that squirm, rock their chairs, or try to get down from the table are doing so not to be “naughty” but because their bodies are stressed by sitting still when they are over-stimulated by the commotion of the table and possibly tired late in the day. Some practical suggestions can reduce the frustration for all of you.

**Good seating and support.** Young children often sit at the table with their feet dangling without support, making them feel unstable and squirmy. An important first step is to get solid foot support for your child from an appropriate height step stool. Their hips and knees should be at approximately 90 degrees. A chair with an adjustable footrest that can be pushed up to the table can be very helpful. (The “Euro HighChair II” adjusts for toddlers up to school age children.)

**Intense muscle work** just before dinner can reduce squirming and stimulate postural muscles.

- Bike riding, using a hop ball (a large ball with a handle for bouncing/riding) or a game involving several trips up and down the stairs can help ready their bodies for sitting.
- Be creative. Try hiding the napkins in various places and having them crab walk to the table with a napkin on their tummy, or bring it on their hop ball.
- Kids can jump or bunny hop to the table when you call them for dinner.

**Short breaks.** Figure out how long your children can typically sit in their chairs.

- Plan a break just before that time and set the timer as you sit down for the meal. When the timer rings, congratulate them on sitting nicely, let them get them down for a short jumping break and then help them get back in their chair. (Repeat the process if needed.)
- Young children should not be expected to sit for long periods. You can gradually lengthen the time they are expected to stay at the table. It is better to start with ten minutes of appropriate behavior at the table, providing a healthy snack later if necessary, than have power struggles predominate your mealtime.