

#1 Getting Them to Eat – the problem of the picky eater

Every second family has a picky eater, and it can be a real worry. DR SUNDUS HUSSAIN-MORGAN tackles the issue of what the ideal diet is, explains how and why children may resist it, and – most importantly – provides some helpful suggestions to overcome the problem.

So, you've cooked a delicious meal for your child, only to have it examined, sniffed at and then rejected? If so then you're not alone – 20 to 50 percent of children are described as picky eaters by their parents.

The ideal diet for children is one that balances high energy with a nutrient content that's required for growth and development. Children may start resisting as they are presented with new foods and different mealtime expectations. Often, this is a temporary problem that can be resolved by making a few changes.

1. Be sensitive to your child's appetite

We often overestimate how much a child needs to eat. Children know how much they need, so forcing them to eat when they are not hungry, or to finish what's on their plate, may create anxiety about food and mealtimes. Serve smaller portions and give your child an opportunity to ask for more.

2. Stick to a routine

Try to serve meals and snacks at about the same time each day. Children have smaller stomachs, so a schedule of three meals with two snacks is usually ideal.

3. Introducing new foods

You may need to offer a new food between ten and fifteen times before your child decides to try it. So be patient, and talk about the food's colour, texture and shape rather than the taste.

4. Be creative and make it fun

Use cookie cutters to cut food into different shapes. Serve brightly coloured foods. Serve vegetables with tasty dips.

5. Bulk up meals with vegetables and fruit

Add grated vegetables to the ingredients for spaghetti bolognese, stews and casseroles, add thinly sliced vegetables to cheese and ham pizza, and top cereals and yoghurts with fruit.

6. Do not offer dessert as a reward

Together with withholding dessert, this will make desserts seem like the best thing in the world. Offer dessert perhaps a couple of times a week, and fruit at other times.

7. Involve your child

Take your child to the supermarket and let them choose fruit and vegetables. Encourage them to help you in the kitchen.

8. Be a good role model

Eat balanced and healthy meals together with your child.

9. Avoid distractions

Meals should be eaten at the dining-room table and not in front of the TV, so that your child focuses on the food.

10. Mealtime etiquette

Encourage your child to remain at the table during mealtimes, even if he or she doesn't eat, but keep mealtimes about 20 to 30 minutes long. If he or she doesn't eat, don't offer alternative foods; that will only encourage pickiness.

Note: If an eating problem persists or you are concerned about your child's growth, do seek advice from your GP or from a dietician.

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