Feeding Tips for Picky Eaters

These are general feeding guidelines. Discuss these hints and other options with your child’s health care provider.

How can I help my child to eat better?

Be a role model:

- Eat with your child. Young children eat better when adults are around.
- Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables.
- Follow the advice of your dietitian, nutritionist and health care provider.

Create the right environment:

- Make meals pleasant. Mealtimes are meant to be enjoyable for you, your child, and your family. Help your child learn that eating can be fun.
- Limit distractions.
- Limit mealtime to about 30 minutes.
- Your child should sit at the table for all meals and snacks.
- Your child should sit in his own chair or highchair.
- At the end of each meal, have your child take “one last bite” to signal the end of the meal. Do not offer more food after the “last bite.”
- If your child refuses the “last bite,” gently touch the spoon to his lips as a symbolic “last bite.” This will help your child learn that meals must end on your terms and not because he refuses to eat.

Always end the meal with praise. Cheer for your child. Say things such as “Good job taking that bite of food,” “I like how you are holding your fork,” or “Good job trying the new food.”
How do I deal with my child’s feeding behaviors?

Some of the common feeding behaviors and coping suggestions are listed below.

Tantrums:

- **Ignore behavior** when your child refuses food or shows other poor mealtime habits such as throwing food off the table. Give your child a “mini-timeout” by turning your head away from your child for about 20 seconds. If your child throws food, ignore this behavior. Wait until the end of the meal and have your child help pick up the food that was thrown off the table.
- **Praise your child** when he takes a bite of food. Cheer for your child by saying, “Good job taking that bite of food.”

Picky Eater:

- **Children need to practice trying new food.** You may need to offer a new food 10-15 times before your child will learn to like the food.
- Have your child take “one bite” of a new food at the end of one meal each day. Offer the same food every day for one week. You may need to start by having your child just touch the food to his lips and tongue before it is familiar enough for him to take a small bite.
- Praise your child when he tastes new foods.

The Grazer:

- A ‘grazer’ is a child who eats and drinks small amounts of food throughout the day. These children do not feel hungry at mealtimes because they snack all day. Children who ‘graze’ eat less than children who have a set mealtime.
- Offer three meals and 2 – 3 snacks each day.
- Do not offer snacks or drinks 30 minutes before or after meals. When you wait 30 minutes, your child will likely eat more because he will not fill up on fluids before the meal.

The Short Order Cook:

- “Short order cook” caregivers may be preparing 4-5 meals per day. Caregivers hope that the child will eat one of these choices.
- Offer your child a choice between two foods. Offer these choices at the start of the meal.
- If your child is too young or is unable to choose, you may choose the food.
- When your child refuses food, offer the food at the next meal. This will teach the child that he will not get a “better food” by refusing the food that you offer.