

When Do You Worry About a Picky Eater?

By [PERRI KLASS, M.D.](#) OCT. 10, 2016

I saw one of the white-food kids a couple of weeks ago — a 9-year-old boy who lives on French fries, chicken fingers, white rice and white bread. Some white-food kids are so strict that their parents have to warn the restaurant that if there's a little ceremonial dusting of parsley on the French fries, the child won't eat them.

My patient's mother was despairing: He won't touch a vegetable, she said. He isn't getting any healthy food at all. Some picky eaters are scrawny, but this one was chunky. In fact, it's surprising to me how often a parent tells me, if I express some concern about the rapid rate of weight gain, that the child hardly eats anything, the child has no appetite, the child is incredibly, heartbreakingly, picky. And though I could tell you a perfectly true story about a mother who said just that as her child sat in the exam room, munching his way through a large bag of pizza-flavored Doritos, the truth is that it can be genuinely painful for parents to watch their children refuse food, and worry that they are somehow failing to provide the necessary [vitamins](#), protein and vegetables.

People are often pretty judgmental about picky eaters, disapproving strongly of the children themselves (“So unadventurous, so fearful of new tastes!”); of their parents (“Don't they know it's their responsibility to make the rules!”); and, inevitably, of our degenerate and too-permissive times (“Why, when I was a child, we ate what was put in front of us, and no nonsense!”).

Dr. Natalie Muth, a pediatrician in Vista, Calif., near San Diego, who is also a registered dietitian and the co-author with Sally Sampson of “[The Picky Eater Project](#),” to be published by the American Academy of Pediatrics next month, told me that it's important to expose children to different flavors even through what the mother eats during [pregnancy](#) and [breast-feeding](#). (The techniques used in the book were explained in more detail last year in a series of [posts](#) on the Motherlode blog.)

She said many children become comparatively picky around the age of 2, so it's important to expose younger children to many foods, many times. They are more open to trying new things in that first year of eating solid foods, between 6 and 18 months, and multiple exposures help them learn to like different flavors.



“I talk about training your taste buds; it can take a lot of tries to like something,” Dr. Muth said. “You don't even have to chew and swallow, just take it on your tongue.”

And that 2-year-old who may be developmentally more neophobic — nervous about new things — also is developmentally ready for all the struggles of separation and independence. “We’re all born liking sweet and salty, and a 2-year-old is no exception,” said Dr. Muth. “But also, a 2-year-old is trying to assert himself.”

When those struggles persist around food, and parents find themselves faced with that picky eater, the idea is to go on offering foods, go on encouraging repeated tastes, go on letting the child see other family members eat different foods — to do all that but to let the child make the actual decisions about what to eat. “There’s a division of responsibility, which was first described by the dietitian [Ellyn Satter](#),” Dr. Muth said, “parents choosing what’s offered and when, the child choosing what to eat of what’s offered.”

As a pediatrician, I worry when children don’t gain weight — or sometimes, when they gain too much, like some white-food eaters. We start with the assumption that picky eaters are just picky, and [studies](#) have shown that while they may not eat many vegetables, they generally take in about the same amount of food as other children.

Parents may find it helpful — and reassuring — to give multivitamins to children whose diets are very limited, even as they are encouraging them to expand their range.

“A hungry child will eventually eat,” Dr. Muth said. “Your best shot is having your child hungry at mealtimes when there is a variety of food.”

And though it can be a long process, Dr. Muth says, she encourages parents to keep trying, and not to give way to the temptation to create parallel meals. “One family, one meal,” she said. “Maybe include something that your child will eat, but don’t cater to the picky preference by making a second meal or making some alternative always available.”

The child will either come around or else learn to cook, she said, and children who do learn to cook have been shown to be more interested in trying new foods.

This can be a long process, and very distressing for parents; pediatricians can help make sure that the child is, in fact, growing normally, and help address the question of whether something else might be going on.

In those rare cases when a child doesn’t grow properly, you have to consider more serious issues, from food [allergies](#) and GI problems to [autism](#) and other developmental issues.

I have a pediatrician friend whose own baby wouldn’t eat. He did fine on [breast milk](#) and formula, but when it came time to make the transition to solid foods, he just didn’t seem to have any appetite. It was impossible to get food into him, and his [growth failure](#) was significant enough that his pediatrician began diagnostic tests for some of the many possible syndromes and chronic illnesses that can cause what we call failure to thrive.

The child was also slow to start talking, and it was his speech therapist who suggested that there might be a connection to his difficulties with eating. He needed specialized occupational therapy

to help his mouth do its various jobs; when he got better at chewing and swallowing, he began to gain weight and grow.

But most children don't have a serious medical problem. Yet despite a parent's best efforts to offer a variety of foods, some children are pretty resistant. I know that the mother of that 9-year-old in my exam room thought that she was failing her son, and she probably worried that I was judging her for his weight gain, and for giving him all that white food, which was the only food he would eat.

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Those were not the messages I intended to send, but the emotional overtones of eating and feeding continue to be powerful for parents, as their children grow up. We feel directly responsible for what our children eat — and what they don't eat — but the negotiations around autonomy and responsibility are more complicated than that.

“It's not a lost cause,” Dr. Muth said. “We can help kids be more healthy and adventurous eaters, but it takes time.”

There is a big difference between tasting and eating. This article implies that by saying that it's ok even if a child just puts a taste of the food on the tongue. But parents need more information about how to teach children to be willing tasters. First, if your child is very resistant, conduct tastings away from the table/meals. Second, think teeny taste. Offer a pea-sized amount. Third, don't ask if the child likes the food. Ask for a description of something. Is it sweet? Crunchy? Redder than the apple from yesterday? Fourth, consider making a chart so children can see how the same foods are described over time. Asking children to taste foods at dinner can be too much pressure because it implies eating, which some kids "know" they don't want to do. **Asking kids if they like the food encourages a "no," and no's are hard to turn into multiple tastings. And, "just taste it and if you don't like it you don't have to eat it," teaches kids to say they don't like something because it's the only "legal" out.**

This is the advice parents need pediatricians to tell them.

Dina Rose, Author of *It's Not About the Broccoli*.

I couldn't disagree more. The goal of a meal is to get nutritious food into the child and to teach healthy eating habits, not to have a power struggle over food. Talk about a way to create unhealthy attitudes about eating.

A child has to discover healthy foods that he likes, and being forced to eat stuff he can't stand every week won't get him there. But it will lead him to eat ten cookies when no one is watching.

A better rule would be "you have to try everything once, and if you don't like it, you don't have to eat it." Older kids can make something basic for themselves. Parents can make something basic for very young ones.

When my kids were little and one of them honestly couldn't stand something that everyone else loved, we just made an omelette or grilled a piece of fish while the other meal was cooking. Now that they're getting a bit older, they can make their own (nutritious) alternatives.

It's no big deal, and it creates children who learn that the point of the meal is to eat something that's good for them. I honestly don't get this attitude that it's better to make children dread mealtime as a daily exercise in which someone bigger than they are forces them to consume something they don't like and had no say in choosing. There is a middle ground between Doritos and [insert heavy adult dish] with a side of brussels sprouts.

I am always puzzled both by the apparently wide-spread phenomenon of the "picky eater" and by the weird fascination for French kids "who will eat anything" - both the picky-eater and "kid who will eat anything" are actually very rare occurrences in France.

I wonder whether Americans are not systematically overlooking one factor that they can do very little about - contrary to most other countries, including France and Japan (which seem to be the two most quoted as models on such topics), the US seems to have a much weaker collective food culture.

In France, there seems to be two equally important rules:

- children eat what everyone else is eating. Either at school lunch, sitting with all the other kids, or with the family (no snacking). So very little choice.

- BUT children will be presented with a repetitive and traditional food "repertoire", with a society-wide consensus on "traditional" food that everyone will eat. It encompasses maybe a dozen vegetables, meat, poultry, three sorts of fish, rice, pasta, "traditional" spices, cheese (that would be very spicy food, or sushi, or goat eyes or whatever in other countries). The kid will encounter that same array of food in virtually every setting - at school, at friends', at relatives'. It is quite a predictable (from an adult perspective, healthy but boring) menu. "Foreign" or "adventurous" food (oysters? sushi? kim-chi? spicy? kale?) is NOT served to children.

Many parents don't distinguish between eating a food and liking it. I am much more adventuresome when eating by myself, since if I try something and don't like it, I don't have eat it again. But if I said I disliked a new food as a child, I would be told, "You haven't even tried it." If I had tried it, I was told, "You ate it the last time we had it."

Furthermore, many parents interpret a dislike of a certain dish as a rejection of the entire food. A toddler can't tell you the spaghetti is too salty; all he knows is that food called spaghetti is in front of him and he doesn't like it. It takes a long time to realize that most food served at the family dinner is made up of many ingredients and what you dislike about a dish may be just one of those ingredients.

(I once read a story about a woman whose 4-year-old refused to eat burgers. At a family cookout, the person tending the grill asked, "With or without cheese?" and the girl stopped short and said, "You mean you can fix burgers without cheese?" Her mother and father preferred cheeseburgers and just assumed everyone did.)

For many parents, talking with children about eating, weight or nutrition is like mincing through a conversational minefield.

Indeed, shortly after a study in JAMA [reported](#) that nearly one-quarter of American children and teenagers are obese, the American Academy of Pediatrics [warned](#) that encouraging an adolescent to “eat healthy” could trigger an eating disorder. Adults discussing food choices with young people also may be trying not to trip over their own baggage around health and appearance.

So often, parents worry that comments on their children’s eating habits will be received as judgments about body weight or character. With the flood of Halloween candy coming around the corner, following are some suggestions for ways to talk about healthful eating without any references to looks.

The zero-sum-game angle

Young people understand that there are limits to how much food we can and should take in. Dr. Hope Barkoukis, chairwoman of the department of nutrition in the school of medicine at Case Western Reserve University and a registered dietitian, encourages parents to teach their children that “food is a lifeline for health” and that every food choice moves us either toward physical well-being or away from it.

She notes that highly processed foods do provide energy, but unprocessed foods are the ones that best supply “vitamins, minerals, dietary compounds and biologically active agents with anti-inflammatory, cancer-preventing, immune-boosting properties.”

Some unhealthy foods can be part of a diet, she explains, so long as they don’t crowd out the [essential nutrition](#) that “promotes physical and emotional health, supports the immune system and reduces the risk for disease.”

With a younger child, we can keep our conversations at home neutral, even lighthearted, by deferring to biological realities. For example, we might say, “You know how plants need both water and sunlight to grow? Well, humans need more than just calories to be healthy. A funsize Milky Way will give you energy, but if that’s where most of your fuel comes from, eventually your leaves will start to turn yellow. A pear gives you the same amount of energy, plus a lot of other nutrients you need for health.”

The self-care angle

Framing eating as a critical way that we care for ourselves supports our children’s growing independence and also keeps adults out of fruitless, even dangerous, power struggles over food. The diets of younger children reflect what adults make available, but teenagers inevitably have far more freedom, which they will sometimes exercise at their own expense. In my practice, I’ve worked with anorexic adolescents who dissemble about what and when they are eating, and with overweight teenagers who wished to lose weight yet gorged on sweets to protest diets imposed by their parents.

To promote an attitude of caring for themselves around food, we can help children and teenagers tune in to their appetites to determine how much to eat. Despite the rush of family life we should aim to ask mealtime questions such as, “Are you hungry?” or “How hungry are you?” or “Do you still feel hungry, or are you good to go?” (Nutritionists note that some highly active young people may not be able [to use their appetites](#) as a reliable guide for how much they should eat.)

We can also remind our children that consuming sustaining foods is a key component of self-care. If needed, we could offer something along the lines of, “You know that having a Butterfinger for breakfast is pretty hard on your body, and that I’m in the business of helping you take great care of yourself. Can I make you a quick egg instead?”

Should our children or adolescents eat too little or too much, or not nutritiously enough, we can alert them that they aren’t being fair to themselves and offer to help get them back on track. Failing that (and sometimes, it fails), we can [recruit a neutral outsider](#) like a pediatrician or registered dietitian to guide and monitor a young person’s self-care.

The beyond-the-self angle

Parents can also nudge children and teenagers toward healthy options by addressing the broader impact of what we choose to eat. For example, we might point out that eating a whole fruit leaves a lighter environmental footprint than opting for a factory-made, fruit-flavored snack sheathed in multiple layers of packaging.

Most attempts to improve our diets fail because the short-term gratification of eating junk food easily outmatches the distant benefit of greater physical health. But [linking food choices to altruistic aims](#) can help to increase the likelihood of behavior change. Making a [socially valuable choice](#) provides an immediate pleasure of its own. Once the Halloween candy runs out, you might remind your kids: “Eating a real green apple is way better for the environment than a green-apple-flavored Starburst.”

Similarly, [a new study](#) shows that adolescents in particular may respond to health-related messaging with a social justice bent. Teenagers were found to [choose healthier snacks](#) once they better understood manipulative food industry practices. By portraying “healthy eating as a way to ‘stick it to the man,’” researchers promoted smarter food choices by harnessing the powerful adolescent [drive for autonomy](#).

It’s helpful to remember that talking about food choices is only one of the ways we shape how our children eat. Indeed, [research consistently demonstrates](#) that what children consume tends to match what their parents consume, both in terms of food quality and quantity. Economic and logistical barriers sorely [limit nutritional options](#) for many families, but parents who are able to choose how they themselves eat can reinforce healthy habits by modeling them.

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