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Breaking the Rules: Letting Go of Manners to Decrease a Child's Feeding Aversions

By Megan-Lynette Richmond, CCC-SLP



How do I determine if my child has a food aversion?

Every child has food preferences. Some children love spaghetti, while others do not. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches may be your child's favorite snack, while his best friend's snack is a turkey sandwich. There is no cause for alarm if your child does not like cherries. But what if your child refuses all foods that are red or blocks his/her mouth anytime you place ketchup on the plate?

What if your child despises crunchy foods? You may see him or her spitting out potato chips, throwing crunchy granola bars on the floor, or refusing to come into the kitchen because you have crackers out for snack. Your child may have an aversion to a particular group of foods characterized by color, texture, taste, smell, or even size that causes his or her behavior to change. Feeding aversions are more common in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Disorders, or those needing alternative feeding methods (i.e., feeding tubes) for a period in their lives.

A team of professionals can diagnose whether your child has a food aversion. First, consult your physician to rule out the possibility of your child having a swallowing disorder – problems with chewing and/or swallowing foods due to disorders of the lips, tongue, teeth, jaw, and/or pharynx. Some children may stop eating foods if they experience pain every time they try to swallow. A poor diet can lead to delayed physical and mental growth and development. If the doctor confirms an aversion to feeding, he or she may refer you to a feeding team: behavioral psychologist and/or developmental psychologist, dietitian, speech language pathologist (SLP), and/or occupational therapist (OT).



Why so many professionals for such a small problem?

For many children, feeding aversions are not small at all and affect all aspects of their lives. There are so many components to a feeding aversion that it takes a team to identify it as such. The pediatrician will help gauge if your child is consuming enough foods to get the necessary vitamins and nutrients for development. In addition, he or she can tell you how your child is developing in relation to other children his or her age. If the child's feeding aversion becomes severe, the pediatrician may recommend other alternatives (i.e., feeding tubes).

A psychologist will help your family with implementing any recommended interventions and with diagnosing if the disorder is behavioral. For example, a change in lifestyle (change of school, recent move, loss, and/or addition in the family) can cause your child to start refusing foods, or the child may suffer from "neophobia" – fear of food. A psychologist can help identify this information. The dietitian can help develop a plan



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to make sure the child receives all age appropriate nutrients and calories for healthy growth.

The SLP will assist the child by assuring that the child is processing various textures of food safely. If necessary, the OT and SLP can help the child strengthen lip, tongue, and jaw muscles to chew and swallow foods. The OT will also help if the child's feeding aversions are due to deficits in sensory integration or regulation. The OT targets this by desensitizing the child's aversion to various textures, smells, tastes, and/or color.



How can parents and caregivers help? Break the Rules!

If the professionals agree that your child has a food aversion, break the rules to help your child eat more.



Play with your food!

If your child has an aversion to food at the table, present the food to him/ her in another setting and for a purpose other than eating. Encourage your child to play with the food. Take potatoes and cut them into various shapes. Dip the potato shapes into finger paint, stamp pictures on paper, and viola! You have a masterpiece! On the other hand, smash berries in a bowl, and use the juices as paints. Use marshmallows, fruits, and cereals to make faces on a plate. Hint: use peanut butter as a paste.



You do not have to clear your plate!

Rejoice in your child's feeding accomplishments. Start small. Set a target (two bites, five bites, etc.), and reward your child when he or she reaches the goal. The reward can be anything from verbal praise, playtime, or even

better – a food he/she enjoys eating. If you as the caregiver set the goal, stick to it. If your child finishes two bites in thirty seconds, stop and reward them. If that was the entire goal for the meal, allow your child to change activities or leave the table. This helps your child build rapport and trust with you during mealtimes. Once your child is consistently accepting the food, you can begin working on increasing the volume.



Sing at the dinner table.

It is a good practice to sit and eat the undesirable foods with your child. During feeding time, talk about how you bite into the food, how you chew it, how it feels to you, and/or how it tastes to you. Make up a cute story or song to get your child engaged in the mealtime or the aversive foods. This will decrease the stress or anxiety and encourage communication skills about foods. It is better for your child to express "I don't like this food because....." rather than throwing the food, crying, or even refusing it. By talking about what you like, your child can begin to identify what he/ she doesn't like. This helps you know about other foods you may want to work with.



Sweets and Treats are OK at mealtime.

If your child enjoys a particular treat, this gives you leverage for presenting other foods. Thus, you can present these foods intermittently throughout the meal. Think of using them as a reward system during mealtime. Using preferable treats at the beginning of the meal may also encourage the child, and get them "rolling" during mealtime.

Hopefully, "Miss Manners" will pardon our behavior this one time!

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Healthy Lunches Promote Alertness and Productivity:

What's Your Child Eating for Lunch?

By Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.



Parents are fundamental contributors to their child's success. Whether you pack your child's lunch or purchase it from school, it is important to monitor nutritional choices. Lunch provides the energy necessary to continue learning through the rest of the school day. Lunch time at school is a social event as well as a nutritional refueling. Children become preoccupied with the conversation at the table or inhale their lunches so they may hurry out to recess. Providing kids with foods that are convenient, enjoyable, and "cool" to eat help create an unconscious habit of healthy eating. Here are a few suggestions to make lunch inviting and enjoyable.



Tips for Packing Healthy Home Lunches for School

- Involve your child in choosing and preparing foods he/she may take for lunch. He/she will most likely eat what he/she can choose and not give it away or throw it out.

- Plan ahead with your child and think about the lunches you can prepare for the week. Buy the ingredients when you do your regular shopping.
- Know your child's tastes. If he/she'll eat anything, give him/her lots of variety within the food pyramid guidelines. If your child chooses to eat the same thing every day, don't worry too much about it. Just make sure that the lunch is nutritious and well-rounded.
- Use fewer prepackaged foods because of their higher fat, salt, and sugar content. If you choose prepared foods, like crackers and different cheeses, supplement them with fresh fruits, crunchy vegetables, and containers of low-fat dip. Add crunch to lunch with other choices besides chips. Try packing nuts, trail mix, or popcorn. If chips are a favorite, try the baked variety.
- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.



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Freeze juice boxes (look for 100% juice), small bottles of water, or small cartons of milk to help keep foods fresh until lunch. The drink will thaw before lunch and be ready for drinking. Thermos® products will ensure that hot foods remain at a constant temperature. (*Do not freeze aluminum cans of soda! They will explode in your freezer, and besides, they are not a healthy choice.)

- Be creative with packaging by using colorful, theme napkins, stickers to seal sandwiches and brown bags, and sending coded messages on occasion to add to the conversation at the lunch table.
- If preparing lunches the night before, store perishable foods in the refrigerator overnight.
- If using a lunchbox, clean it out each day with hot, soapy water and dry it thoroughly before repacking. Clean Thermos® containers and air dry before reusing.



Buying Lunches Prepared at School

Many schools today are preparing menus as far as a month in advance for students to take home to their parents. This is helpful in deciding which days your child may want to eat the prepared cafeteria food or bring lunch from home.

- If you are still unsure about the cafeteria selections, visit the cafeteria and share lunch with your child. Talk with your child about his/her school lunch choices.

- Schools differ in the preparation of their meals. Some schools may use privately owned enterprises or other institutional kitchens. All schools must use a Nutrient Standard or Food Group system to document the value of their meals for federal authorities. They must meet the standards outlined for them in "Dietary Guidelines for Americans."
- Along with the prepared school lunches, many cafeterias now allow vending machines or provide additional snack items for purchase with no restrictions. Students are free to eat as much as they can buy. Discuss this with your child and encourage him/her to make extra snacks an occasional purchase.
- For many children, their school lunch will be the most important and nutritious meal of their day. Children depend on the hot lunch at school for 1/3 to 1/2 of their nutritional intake. Guide your child in making healthy choices on his/her own. Discuss the need for choosing from the different food groups wisely. Monitor choices by talking after school about what he/she chooses each day for lunch.

Whether your child takes lunch from home, or purchases it at school, the goal is the same—to create a habit of choosing healthy, nutritious foods to keep your child's energy level going for the rest of the school day. Healthy lunches help children be alert and ready to learn. What is your child eating for lunch?

For more information and resources, visit:

<https://schoolnutrition.org/>

<https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>

<https://www.eatright.org/for-kids>

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Picky Eaters

by Abby Sakovich M.S., CCC-SLP



Like adults, children have different preferences when it comes to food. Temperatures, colors, and textures may influence whether a child will try and/or like a new food. Some children are "picky" eaters, and prefer certain types or textures of food and refuse many others. However, a child's refusal to eat certain foods is not considered "picky" if lack of nutrition affects growth and development.

Strategies to Help Picky Eaters

Keep the Options Open

– It can take ten to fifteen attempts before a child will accept a new food! The goal is to keep presenting new options while making the options easier to eat. For example, roasting vegetables may make them taste sweeter or adding a squirt of lemon to cooked broccoli may make it tastier. Some children may refuse to eat cauliflower in head form, but will devour cauliflower rice! Presenting several different options may help turn a refusal into a try.



Planned Plating – The order of presentation and the amount of food given can affect if and how much food a child will eat at mealtime. Try presenting things children are less excited about eating (i.e., veggies) at the beginning of the meal when they are most hungry, followed by food favorites (i.e., chicken nuggets) near the end of the meal. A good rule of thumb for determining serving size is one tablespoon per year of age. For example, two tablespoons of corn is appropriate for a two year old. When portioned correctly, it can appear much more manageable to eat most of the food on the plate.



Timing is Everything – If you know your child is cranky and struggles after a certain time each night, try to have dinner before that happens. Kids who aren't fighting sleep are more likely to sit long enough to try new foods!



Imagination Food Station

– Some kids may be unimpressed with a particular food or dinner combination. Combining certain foods to create something new such as "ants on a log" (i.e., raisins and peanut butter on a celery stick) or inventing new names for familiar staples such as calling broccoli "green alien trees" can be enough fun to shake up the dinnertime routine.



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One Bite Rule – the one bite rule is a great option if a child is refusing to try something new or refuses a food they have eaten in the past. The goal of this rule is not to get a child to eat all of the new food today, but to help them learn to like it over time; therefore, it is important that caregivers hold up their end of the deal and move on after one bite.

If you're worried your child is more than a "picky eater," ask your pediatrician for a referral to a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) or feeding specialist. An SLP or professional with experience working with feeding and swallowing will be able to determine if your child is going through a typical toddler phase or recommend further evaluation and intervention.



Resources:

Barr, Sabrina, "Children May be Picky Eaters Due to Genetics, Claims Study," December 15, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/children-picky-eaters-genetics-parents-fussy-study-food-university-illinois-usa-a8112131.html>.

Micco, Nicci, "How to Handle Picky Eaters," Parenting. Retrieved 12/27/2017 from <http://www.parenting.com/article/picky-eater-kids>

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