

## **Nutrition: Fussy young eaters a challenge for parents**

**Creativity and a cool head help in coping with fussy young eaters**

By Deanna Fox

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It's been a long day, you're eager to get home, make a simple meal and enjoy dinner with your family. In the car, visions of storytelling, laughter and recaps of the day's events dance in your head.

Then you cross the threshold and realize that dinner will likely be a struggle of trying to balance different palates and preferences and handle perhaps one of the hardest parts of parenting: a picky eater.

Picky eating is one of those things we tell ourselves we will never tolerate before we have children, pointing to the toddler at the next table in a busy restaurant who nibbles only from the bread basket and refuses to touch anything green, with sauce, or "funny looking." Still, despite our best efforts in raising children (No sugar before a certain age! No snacking! Balanced meals three times a day!), many of us experience the difficulty of having a child who is a "particular" eater.

"My daughter is the most annoyingly picky eater ever. I swear she goes for days without eating anything but a couple M&Ms, because that's the only thing I can bribe her with to put in her mouth," says Carly Stebbins of Cohoes. Stebbins worries her daughter isn't getting enough calories or good nutrition, especially compared to how her other daughter ate at the same age. "When she actually eats a full meal, or eats something healthy, I generally do a happy dance and have even taken several pictures and posted them on Facebook with captions like, 'She's finally eating! Yay!' " she says.

While Stebbins' frustrations (and celebrations) are understandable, her daughter's dining habits are not unusual.

"It's natural to go through a stage of picky eating," says Keri McComb, the dietetic internship director at The Sage Colleges in Troy. Trying new things can come with hesitation, and children don't necessarily understand the health benefits of a varied diet.

Picky eating has been the subject of many studies, but it remains unclear just how many children fall under that heading. Some studies say as few as 8 percent. Others put the number closer to 50 percent. Part of the discrepancy: There's no single accepted scientific way to define "picky eating." Some researchers rely on parents' observations (aka "Yes, my kid is particular"), while others look at how many foods a kid will or will not eat. When the Times Union put a call out on Facebook looking for parents of children who liked a limited number of foods, we received dozens of email responses and nearly 50 Facebook comments. A week later, the

responses were still coming in.

Regardless of the numbers, our parents may not have experienced this battle at the table with us when we were little.

"Picky eating is a relatively new phenomenon," says Nan Windmueller, a Latham-based dietitian and nutritionist. She says no one talked about picky eating during the Depression, and it is more prevalent in America than in other countries. The famous example is France — the French encourage diversity in meals and extended leisure time associated with eating. The concept of quick convenience food hasn't permeated that part of Europe the same way it has in America, she says.

The "American guilt," as she calls it, around our children and how they eat is propelled by offering food to children around the clock, in fear they might starve if they won't eat what is at the table. Many families fall into the trap of making individual meals like a short-order cook to please all palates, but that practice is detrimental more than it is beneficial.

"The child eats what the family eats," says Windmueller, who notes eating can be one manifestation of the power dynamic in the family.

"Children are smart, and (not eating) can be a play for power," says Marianne Romano, a dietitian and health coach in Albany. Romano says mealtime clarifies the division of responsibility in feeding children; it is the parent's responsibility to provide food, but it is the child's responsibility to eat.

"I don't feel a child should be forced," she says, but food must be at least provided at set times and not randomly. By allowing a child to graze all day long on whatever he or she wants, there is no incentive for him or her to eat at the family mealtime.

Successful eating begins before food is placed on the table. Have a designated eating area away from electronics and distractions, says Romano. Get kids involved in the entire food process, as well.

Try starting a window herb garden children can pick from to adorn their plates, and let them help in choosing a weekly menu and purchasing items at the market.

Kids can also help prepare meals, from mixing and measuring to rough chopping. If the idea of cooking with your child induces stress, try to remember the memories and skills developed from the joint activity will long outweigh the five extra minutes of cooking or cleanup time that might come from it.

Preparing food with kids is a chance to retell family food stories and traditions, help children grasp concepts in creativity, math and reading, and allows them to "feel an ownership in the process and sense of pride," says Windmueller.

From there, try to maintain realistic expectations. "Things don't happen overnight," says

Romano. McComb says children need to be exposed to a new food at least 10 to 12 times before accepting it, and that exposure can mean seeing, touching and smelling it, not always eating it.

"Don't give up and don't give in. I suggest starting with three bites, then work towards an acceptable portion," says Jennifer Nardone, a registered dietitian and nutritionist in Albany.

Stebbins has tried everything, she says.

"I've read every article and blog I could find. Spoke to her doctor," says the mom. "Tried just leaving it out until she was hungry enough to eat it. Bribed her with candy and promises of snacks if she took just one bite of something good. Nothing worked."

Sometimes, that's just how mealtime goes with kids, say experts.

"Recognize that children eat like children," says Romano, and that small portions are OK. Ultimately, the child will decide whether or not to eat.

Dealing with a picky eater can be incredibly frustrating and feels never ending, but when you feel you are about to lose your cool, remember as long as your child is growing, you are providing food regularly, and you remain calm despite a temper tantrum at the dinner table (presumably your child's), you are doing a great job. Missing one meal won't lead to a starving child.

Being unwavering in your eating patterns with children can have a positive effect on other parts of the parent/child relationship, as well, according to experts.

*Deanna Fox is a frequent contributor to the Times Union. More can be found at [www.deannafox.org](http://www.deannafox.org) or on Twitter and Instagram @DeannaNFox.*

Picky eating isn't only prevalent in children. While most people grow out of their childhood tendencies, some continue to be difficult to please into adulthood. Many chefs happily accommodate a growing list of allergies and dietary restrictions, though for a good experience, review a restaurant's menu before being seated or call a chef ahead of time and discuss your preferences, says Dominic Colose, executive chef of The Wine Bar in Saratoga Springs.

**Ric Orlando, of the New World restaurant group, says picky eating as an adult is often a "visual reaction to something they don't think they are going to like," stemming from hesitation to new food or a negative memory from eating as a child. He suggests closing your eyes when you try something you might be averse to and see if it changes your perspective.**

### **Tips for picky eaters**

**Try a cooking class.** Check out Different Drummer's Kitchen in Albany for the calendar of upcoming kids' cooking classes.

**Buy a cookbook.** We like "Better Homes and Gardens New Junior Cookbook," "The

Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook," "The Disney Princess Cookbook" and "The Little House Cookbook."

**Challenge kids in a positive way.** "Make trying a new food an accomplishment or achievement," and offer positive reinforcement for trying, says Orlando.

**Don't use food as a reward.** Use sweets in moderation as part of a balanced diet, says Romano, and avoid associating privilege or special purpose will food.

**Keep distractions to a minimum.** Make dinner time a chance to connect with the family. Keep toys, phone calls, and electronics away from the table.

**Have a place to eat together.** It can be easy to let backpacks and junk mail pile up on the kitchen table, but strive to keep it tidy so that sitting down and eating together is an easy habit, not another struggle.

**Eat at regular times.** Kids thrive on predictability and a schedule, so serving dinner at the same time each day can help with the hesitation to try new food. Eating in regular intervals helps to avoid over-hunger or a meal thwarted by snacking.

**Have realistic expectations.** "It takes a lot of time for a child to try a new thing," says Romano. Getting kids to eat their vegetables won't happen overnight, so have patience and keep trying. Keep portions small and at first, have kids smell, touch, and see the food. Ask them to taste it after the first introduction.

**Don't be a short-order cook making multiple meals to ensure everyone eats.** Letting a child have one food they don't like might make them more accepting of other foods.

**It's OK for kids to have one food they insist on.** Kids go through phases in eating, like everyone else, says McComb. If they insist on eating PB&J for lunch every day, let them, but insist they vary other lunch items.

**Make it visually appealing.** Incorporate colorful fruits and vegetables into a child's diet to pique their interest. Try purple cauliflower, rainbow chard, and a variety of carrots.

Adults, too

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