

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Joseph Baker

## Parenting a Picky Eater

*“I’m not eating that.” “I don’t eat red food.” “This smells funny.” “That doesn’t look good.” “Eeeewwww...” Sound familiar? If you’ve got a toddler or preschooler, you’ve most likely struggled with the “picky-eater” phase.*



Although this stage can be aggravating and stressful, rest assured that it’s normal, temporary and even manageable. Recent scientific research offers new hope for those grappling with picky eating. New studies shed light on why preschoolers refuse certain foods, revealing techniques that will and won’t work in the battle of Billy vs. Broccoli. Dr. Baker wants to share this late-breaking information with patients and the community.

### Reality Check

Before discussing how to manage a picky eater, Dr. Baker reminds parents that it’s important to set realistic expectations. Keep in mind that toddlers and preschoolers don’t need a lot of food. So you may think they’re being picky, when they’re actually full. For instance, a 2-year-old only needs approximately 1,000 calories a day. And the serving size for toddlers is one-third to one-fourth the serving size for adults.

Also consider that children typically consume all the nutrients and calories they need over the course of a week, not just one day. If they don’t eat

enough one day, they’ll likely make up for it the next. Bottom line: Don’t stress out about a skipped meal here or there.

However, if your child is losing weight or gags on or vomits certain foods, contact your health-care provider immediately.

### Picky Eating: Typical and Temporary

It may seem like your toddler’s picky eating is solely designed to aggravate you, but it may actually be Mother Nature’s way of keeping your little one safe.

When a young “cave baby” first learned to walk, there was the dangerous possibility that he or she could toddle into the woods and eat poisonous berries or other toxic vegetation. In response, toddlers, over time, developed an aversion to new, unfamiliar foods. So this picky-eating phase is actually nature’s way of protecting the young.

Although you probably aren’t too concerned about your child wandering into the woods alone and eating poisonous berries, take comfort in the fact that this is a normal developmental stage. If that’s not comforting enough, remember that most children outgrow extreme picky eating.

### Do As I Do

What’s the most effective way to get your child to eat nutritious food? By eating healthy food yourself. One re-



cent study found that “children’s food preferences may be shaped by observing food selection patterns and eating behaviors of their parents... for instance, toddlers put foods in their mouths more readily when they were following the example of their mothers relative to the same modeling behavior by a stranger.” (*Pediatrics* 1998;101:539-49.)

In another study published this year in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, researchers found that mothers who consumed more fruits and vegetables have daughters who are less picky, eat more fruits and vegetables, eat fewer fats and sweets and are less likely to be overweight.

The authors suggest parents of young children “should focus less on ‘picky eating’ behaviors and more on modeling fruit and vegetable consumption for their children.” (*Am Diet Assoc* 2005; 105:541-8.)

### No Pressure

It may seem at times that the only way to get a well-balanced diet into your child is to force him or her to eat.



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But scientific research reveals that pressuring kids to eat can actually backfire and make kids' eating habits worse, not better.

In a recent study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, the authors found that "initial evidence indicates that imposition of stringent parental controls can . . . disrupt children's regulation of energy intake by altering children's responsiveness to internal cues of hunger and satiety. This can occur when well-intended but concerned parents assume that children need help in determining what, when and how much to eat and when parents impose child-feeding practices that provide children with few opportunities for self-control."

In other words, children have an innate sense of how much food they need. By forcing them to eat, you teach them to ignore this innate sense, which could lead to over- or under-eating.

The authors summarized that "it is the parents' responsibility to supply the child with a healthful array of foods and a supportive eating context, and it is the child's responsibility to decide when and how much to eat." (*Pediatrics* 1998;101:539-49.)

### Forget Forbidding Foods

Another common tactic in dealing with picky eaters is to forbid certain foods, like sweets, or to use these forbidden foods as rewards for eating more healthy foods. However, these tactics may backfire, causing even more picky eating during childhood and possibly laying the psychological groundwork for future eating disorders, warn researchers.

In one study, researchers selected two snack foods typically offered to a group of preschool-aged children in a daycare environment. Children were freely offered both foods during their snack time for several weeks. Then the researchers restricted children's access to one food while providing the other to children in unlimited quantities. The restricted food remained visible in a jar, and the children were aware that the snack was "off limits."

When the "forbidden food" was again

made available, children took larger-than-normal portions and ate more than normal as compared to the initial study period when the food was freely offered (*American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 1999;69:1264-72).

Says Jennifer Orlet Fisher, lead author of the study, "This research does not imply that parents should let children have whatever they want whenever they want it. Structure is as important in child feeding as it is in any other aspect of parenting. Parents should provide children with a variety of nutritious foods and with enough guidance to help their children make reasonable decisions about what and how much to eat."

### Rely on Repeated Exposure

Finally, with a picky eater, it's important to not give up. Studies show that familiarity is key to children accepting food, and that kids need to be exposed to a food many times before it becomes familiar.

One recent study evaluated whether exposing children to a previously disliked vegetable would increase their liking for it. A total of 156 parents of 2- to 6-year-old children were ran-

domly assigned to Exposure, Information, or Control groups after a taste test at which a "target" vegetable was selected. Parents in the Exposure group gave their child a taste of this vegetable daily for 14 days, parents in the Information group were given nutritional advice and a leaflet and parents in the Control group received no further intervention.

All participants took part in a post-study taste test. Greater increases in liking, ranking and consumption of the "target" vegetable from pre- to post-study occurred in the Exposure group than in either of the other two groups. The authors concluded that a parent-led, exposure-based intervention involving daily tasting of a vegetable holds promise for improving children's acceptance of vegetables (*Appetite* 2003;40:155-62).

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## Tips for Getting Your Kids to Eat Healthy Foods

**Disguise food:** Try blending fruit into a smoothie or baking fruit into muffins. Offer veggie strips with a bowl of salad dressing or salsa for dipping.

**Make new food less "scary":** Introduce it alongside an old favorite.

**Get them involved:** Let your kids help with meal planning and shopping. Plant a vegetable garden with your kids; they'll be much more likely to eat the fruits of their labor!

**Think presentation:** Use cookie cutters to make fun shapes out of sandwiches, cheese, anything! Use fruit to make faces on a bowl of yogurt, or make a vegetable face on a homemade, whole-wheat pizza.

**Change the venue:** Kids might be willing to try something new at a "picnic" in the living room or at a "tea party" in the kitchen.

**Timing:** Introduce new foods when your child is hungry.

**Be toddler-friendly:** Make sure toddlers' food is bite size and not too hot, dry or chewy.

**Make mealtime pleasant:** No threats, no battles. Focus on the kids, not on what they're not eating.