



Mealtime Memo

for Child Care

Picky, Choosy, or Just Normal Eating

As a child care provider, you will experience a number of preschoolers' various eating habits. Children may have big appetites or small appetites, and some children can be considered picky eaters. In most cases, a child's food preference will change often; some children may start to refuse items that they previously loved. It is important to include a variety from all food groups in meals so that children will get nutrients that support their growth and development. Do you have a child in your care that has been labeled a picky eater? What does being a picky eater mean?



A picky eater is someone who may refuse to eat foods based on the texture and/or color of the food, or they may only eat a certain type of food. Sometimes children are interested in doing other things and do not want to sit down and eat at all. Being a picky eater is a typical behavior among preschool children 2-5 years old. What do you do when this happens?

If the children in your care are growing normally and playing as they always have, then usually there is no reason to worry. Talk to the parents and find out what is "normal" for their child. In most cases, picky eaters will return to their old eating habits in their own time.

What can you do to help children in your care become more familiar with and open to trying new foods? Make trying a new food fun! Involve children in making snacks. Be sure to choose foods that meet the meal pattern for a reimbursable meal. Start the activity before snack time so that when you are finished the children can eat the snack they just made.

When offering children food, give the child choices with the same food group. For example, ask, "Do you want oranges or apples?" They will more likely choose instead of saying no. Giving them a choice helps them feel like they are the decision maker and you are not deciding for them. Set up a play grocery store with play food in your home or center. Encourage parents to take their children to the grocery store with them. Have the children help make a list of foods they want to try. Then take a vote on the order the food should be tried.



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Offer a new food once a week and talk about it before meal time. Show pictures of the food of the week and provide information on how the food grows. Talk about the color, what nutrients it provide, and how the nutrients help the body function and grow. A few days before the activity teach them new words to describe the new food. Explain the words and their meanings. Then repeat this information right before the activity. Include foods that answer the following questions:

- How does it look? color, shape, size
- How does it feel? smooth, bumpy, fuzzy, soft, hard, cold, hot
- How does it sound? crunchy, crackle, pop, snap, or splash
- How does it taste? sweet, salty, bitter, spicy, bland, sour



A final activity could be planting a garden. Start small with window boxes. Teach children how to sow and tend to the plants. Children want to eat what they have planted, watered, and harvested while at your center or child care home.

Another way of teaching children where food comes from is to take them to a farm. If you cannot go to a farm, see if a farmer can come to you. Consider using USDA materials regarding growing vegetables and other foods. Check out books from the library that will show the steps for growing foods. Borrowing books from the library also will give children a lesson on where and how to get information.

How much will the children be able to help you? Here is some information on what children can do at different ages.

Two years old

- Children can wipe tables, hand items to the adult to put away, put items in the trash, tear lettuce or greens, and make faces out of fruits and vegetables.

Three years old

- Children can add ingredients, scoop, mash, squeeze, stir, name and count foods, and help assemble a pizza.

Four years old

- Children can peel eggs, oranges, and bananas; set the table; measure dry ingredients; make sandwiches; and toss salads.

Five years old

- Children can do all the things a 2, 3, and 4-year-old can do, plus measure liquid, cut soft fruit with a plastic knife, and use an egg beater.

10 Tips for Picky Eaters

- Respect children's appetites – or lack of one. (Don't force children to eat. Ask them to try a food. Don't allow a power struggle that may cause anxiety when coming to the table.)
- Stick to a routine. (Serve meals the same time every day. Don't allow children to fill up on liquids before eating.)
- Be patient with new foods. (Allow children to touch and smell. Let them talk about the color, shape, smell, and the way it feels in their hands or in their mouth.)
- Don't be a short-order cook. (Do not prepare a separate meal because a child won't eat the one on the table.)
- Make it fun! (Serve a variety of brightly colored food. Use cookie cutters to make different shapes.)
- Recruit children to help. (Have them help you plan the grocery list, get the food at the grocery store, and wash the produce right before eating it.)
- Set a good example. (Children will watch you; if you eat the vegetables, it will encourage them to eat them as well.)
- Be creative! (You can add chopped broccoli to spaghetti sauce, fruit on the top of cereal, or chopped carrots in casseroles and soups.)
- Minimize distractions. (No television or other gadgets/games while eating at the table.)

Reference

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PICKY, CHOOSY, OR JUST NORMAL EATING

Tip Sheet



01

Make trying a new food fun!



Have children help make a list of new foods to try.

02

03

Involve children in making snacks.



Set up a play grocery store.

04

05

Offer and talk about a new food once per week.



Let children “shop” and choose fruits, vegetables, and other food.

06