

“Marissa ate well as a baby and toddler, but now that she has turned four years of age, suddenly all vegetables are “yuck” and she won’t eat anything on her plate if one food is touching the other. I dread mealtimes. What should I do?”

Sound familiar? Picky eating habits can often turn what should be a pleasant time into a battleground. Picky eating habits can be especially stressful for parents of children who have disabilities, as many children can be underweight for their height or have medical issues that affect how easily they can eat. This TelAbility handout will provide some suggestions on how to manage this challenging issue.

- ✓ *Do not force or bribe your child to eat. This will only increase the problem. Children are born with good control of their food intake-as adults we often “teach” children to take in more than they would normally eat, breaking this natural ability to control appetite. Research has shown that when a child is forced or bribed to eat, they eat less than if left alone to eat at their own pace.*
- ✓ *Bear in mind any food modifications your child may need based on their special health care needs. It is unfair to expect a child to eat a hamburger if their therapist has found they tolerate pureed textures easier. Peeled or canned fruit may be easier to eat than raw fruit, and cooked or steamed vegetables may be easier to chew and swallow than raw ones.*
- ✓ *When children associate pain with eating, they are not as likely to eat well. Be sure any issues such as heartburn or reflux are evaluated and treated properly, as this can significantly affect a child’s appetite and intake.*
- ✓ *Children’s appetites are going to be different based on their growth spurts. Older babies, for example, tend to eat great as they are going through a period of rapid growth, but growth needs of a 1-2 year old slow down some, and so will their appetites. Try to trust your child’s appetite-they will eat again when they are hungry. This may need to be watched a little more closely if your child has had trouble gaining weight over a period of time and more specialized evaluations and intervention may be needed.*
- ✓ *Keep in mind that portion sizes for children under the age of 6 or 7 are about half that of an adult portion. For preschoolers, about 1 tablespoon per year of life per food item is a good rule of thumb (for example a 3 year old serving of applesauce is about 3 Tbsp). Don’t set your kids up for failure by serving overwhelming portion sizes.*

- ✓ *Set a good example. When your child sees you eating fruits and vegetables as snacks, eating breakfast and drinking milk with meals, this, over time, often encourages them to follow your behavior. Try to eat as a family as often as possible. Be certain meal times are pleasant, and keep distractions (like T.V.s, favorite toys etc) out of reach. Avoid having unpleasant conversations about school or discipline issues at mealtimes.*
- ✓ *Remember that most children are a little cautious of new situations. The same holds true for new foods. It can take an average of 10 TIMES before one can really determine if their child does not like something. Patience really IS a virtue for parents when it comes to eating!*
- ✓ *Some structure with meals and snacks can help mealtimes be more successful. If your child has filled up on juice and Goldfish crackers all afternoon, it is likely that they will not be very hungry for dinner. 3 meals with 1-2 snacks per day are usually plenty for a preschooler/school-age child. Timing of meals is important as well; if kids are cranky after a long day of school or therapies, or it is close to naptime, mealtimes may not run as smoothly.*

✓
WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE??

- ❖ It is our job as parents to
 1. Purchase and prepare healthy foods and snacks
 2. Decide what times meals (and sometimes snacks) are served. Some type of a schedule often helps children with routine.
- ❖ It is the child's responsibility to...
 1. Decide how much they are going to eat
 2. Decide whether or not they are going to eat

Establishing these boundaries during the toddler years is important, as it can save you from ending up with a "food battleground" as your child grows.

- ❖ **AVOID BECOMING A "SHORT -ORDER" COOK.** This is something I hear about all of the time from families! Some compromise is ok (for example: "if you don't want to eat your beans there is applesauce or yogurt in the fridge.") Avoid jumping up and making 2-3 different food selections for your child; it does not promote healthy eating practices and increases that controlling tug-of war so often present between parents and children.

With a little patience and creativity, mealtimes can become a fun family activity instead of a time to dread. Staying mindful of any limitations with diet your child may have (textural, temperature etc) can also lead to success at meal times. If eating issues become a constant problem and your child is growing poorly, talk to your healthcare team about it, so eating can be evaluated and goals set. Below are some helpful references if you need more assistance with this area.

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References

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