

# PICKY EATERS

From food **WARS**  
to  
mealtime **PEACE**

by dr. **stephanie** peltz, nd

**P**icture this: a mother zooms home after a busy workday. She walks in the door and tries to connect with her child while assembling a dinner that fits the bill: Does it include fresh vegetables? And no refined sugar? Or maybe she's attempting a gluten-free/dairy-free/plant-based meal. Dinner is finally ready and she sits down as her darling three-year-old takes one look at the labour of love in front of her and yells, "YUCK!" before promptly tossing the meal onto the floor. *Ugh!* Can you relate?

Picky eating is a hot topic. Food activist and author Sally Fallon states: "In no period of our history as a nation have North Americans been so concerned about the subject of diet and nutrition." Full disclosure: at one time in my bright-eyed and bushy-tailed naturopathic career, I delivered a lot of textbook advice to parents about *their* picky eaters. Then I had my son, and embarked on a long, winding journey of eating with him. Needless to say, I have been utterly humbled by the process.

Our eating habits are shaped by a multitude of factors. What a child is served, and accepts, is often determined by a complex combination of the family's ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic, knowledge, media consumption, geographical location, politics, philosophy, and values. Other influences include the child's genetics, mood, sleep, appetite, upbringing, the food's availability, convenience, texture, colour, smell, taste, and so, so much more. *Phew, that's a lot of variables!*

Never fear. Contrary to what you might think, the bulk of childhood picky eating, with a few exceptions, is actually within the realm of normal. For the most part, parents become concerned with a couple of common stumbling blocks that arise from the first solid food introduction and may last well into the school years. Specifically, parents want to make sure their child is getting enough vegetables,

and if they're eating veggies at all, are they getting enough variety? Parents tell me they dread mealtime — and I know the feeling. Such sentiments may be inevitable from time to time, but can be exhausting over the long term. Think about how often our kids need to be fed! Try incorporating some of these tips, the goal of which is an easier, more peaceful mealtime — even if some of that food still ends up on the floor!

## VEGGIES, VEGGIES, AND MORE VEGGIES!

**Start a small garden.** Kids are more likely to eat something they watched go from seed to plate. Let them "pick" their own dinner.

**Little helpers, anyone?** Kids also tend to eat more when they are involved in the planning/shopping/cooking process.

**I'm hungry!** Try offering vegetables first, before other foods, and right after exercise and fresh air, when kids' appetites are high.

**Get creative.** Preparation style and presentation can make a big difference. Give one of those crinkle cutters a shot, or turn their usual sandwich into an open happy-faced monster with peppers for a smile and carrots for fangs.

**Get sneaky!** If needed, sneak some veggies into smoothies, baking, soups, and other comfort foods. See Dr. Heidi Lescanec's recipes for some great examples.

## EXPLORING NEW FOODS WHILE MAINTAINING PEACEFUL MEALTIMES IS POSSIBLE!

**Serving Style** can make all the difference! Why not try cutting some food out in fun shapes, or investing in a spiralizer?

**Consider the "division of responsibility" model**, developed by dietician Ellen Satter: the parent decides *when* to eat, *what* to serve, and *where* to serve it, and the child decides *whether* and *how much* to eat.

**Offer layered meals**, with plenty of healthy options so there is always one 'win' available.

**Monitor your child's consumption over the course of a week** rather than focusing on each individual meal. Studies show it typically balances out.

**Model good eating habits.** Try and enjoy a variety of foods yourself, sit down to eat, and avoid electronics at the table.

**Keep mealtimes as relaxing as possible.** Set the table, play soft music, light candles, and lower the pressure by refraining from commenting on what/how much your child is eating.

**Avoid rewarding and bribing with food**, especially sweets.

**Get nutrition in at breakfast.** It may be easier, especially for young ones, due to end-of-day fatigue or over-stimulation, which can make little ones uncooperative at supertime.

**Consider cutting down on snacks** if intake at meals is continually an issue.

**Don't give up!** Two- to five-year-olds are known to resist unfamiliar foods. It may take 10 to 15 tastes before they will accept it.

## PICKY EATING & PICKING YOUR BATTLES

For me, things shifted when I realized I didn't want meals to be a battleground: I wanted eating to be a way of connecting and experiencing pleasure. I remembered my own childhood and how I survived on chicken fingers for years and yet still went on to become an inclusive eater. I also realized my little guy is among the "supertasters" of the world; to him, flavours and textures are much more intense. I changed my approach, created rituals around our eating, and found the words, "You don't have to eat it." For us, being relaxed and providing predictability has helped, but it is a continuous process of letting go of control. It's about finding your tolerance level, picking your battles, and continuing to gently nudge your wee ones along the way.

I'm the first to say the struggle is *real* and I believe there is no one "right" way to feed a child. Let's move away from shame, blame, and guilt, and stop pressuring ourselves so much as parents. This is not about perfection, but instead, muddling our way through each of our unique journeys the best we can. Feeding and raising these little people is tricky business requiring a whole lot of love, patience, compassion, and, if we're lucky, some humour to make it through the day. If you're struggling, pick one tip to try and let your next meal be a new adventure (and hopefully a success!) •

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**NB:** If your child is experiencing growth concerns, symptoms of deficiency, digestive complaints, or you are not coping well with feeding dynamics, I encourage you to consult a professional (your MD, a registered holistic nutritionist, or an ND with expertise in pediatrics).



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