



Picky Eater?: Kids are “Eaters in Training”

“Some days Emily eats like a bird, but on other days she’s a bottomless pit!”

“Piper finally took a bite of green beans, but then she took it out of her mouth.”

“He never used to eat salmon, but now he asks for it!”

Does this sound familiar?

“Sometimes Kyle is just not that interested in eating.”

“Yesterday, Sarah wanted more tomatoes. Today, she refused them.”

“Josh picks and chooses. At dinner, he had some potatoes and milk, but totally ignored the chicken and carrots.”

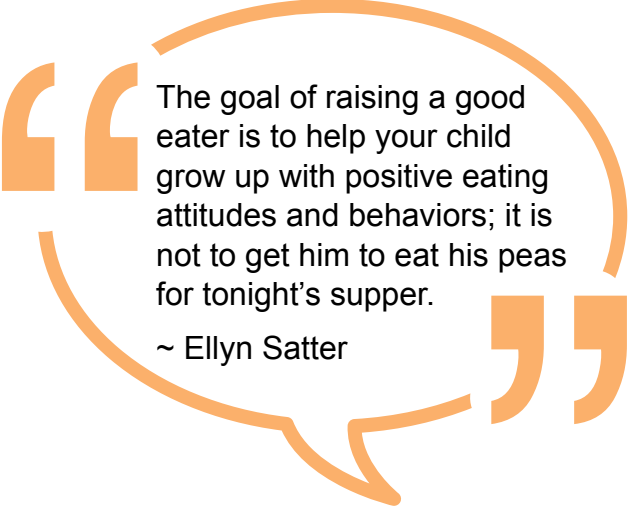
“Raven will eat yogurt at school, but not at home.”

What is normal?

The types and amounts of food young kids eat may change from day to day. This is normal, but it can feel frustrating for parents and caregivers. It can help to view “picky eaters” as “eaters in training.”

Kids will push themselves along in learning to eat new foods. We can trust that (eventually) they will learn to like a variety of food, but they will do this at their own pace. For some kids with challenges, this pace might seem very slow, requiring more of our trust and patience.

We can also trust that kids naturally know how much to eat. Kids know when they are hungry and when they have eaten enough. Their eating patterns might seem erratic, but over time they eat the right amount of food for their bodies and grow in the way that nature intended.



The goal of raising a good eater is to help your child grow up with positive eating attitudes and behaviors; it is not to get him to eat his peas for tonight's supper.

~ Ellyn Satter

“What should I do if he doesn't want to try a new food?”

That's okay. From time to time, offer that food as part of a meal or snack. Invite your kid to try it, without any pressure. In time, they may learn to like it, but they will learn at their own pace. They may need to see it 10 or 20 or more times before they are ready to try it.

How do we support “eaters in training”?

1. Kids benefit from having opportunities to build their comfort with food.
 - Involve kids in preparing a meal or a snack - even young kids can help.
 - Read stories and sing songs about food.
 - Look at food in the grocery store or at the farmer's market.
 - Try hands-on activities, like growing and harvesting food.
 - Sit together and share a meal with others - this supports learning even if kids don't try or eat a particular food.
2. Kids do better when they can learn at their own pace. Since pressure can make learning feel *harder*, remove pressure around eating.
 - Pressure can involve pleading, making deals, cheerleading, “take one bite” rules, “clean your plate” rules, or anything else that might cause a child to feel badly about what they have or have not eaten.
 - Pressure can be spoon feeding kids who have the skills to feed themselves.
3. Kids do best with eating when we apply a Division of Responsibility in Feeding. This includes offering regular meals and snacks, and making meal and snack times pleasant. See the next page to learn more about feeding roles for adults and eating roles for kids.

Feeding roles for adults

Adults decide *what* food and drinks to offer.

- Make the same meal or snack for everyone.
- Aim to include a variety of foods over the course of the day. Offer protein foods, whole grains, vegetables, and fruit.
- When introducing a new food, offer it with a familiar food.

Adults decide *when* to serve meals and snacks.

- Offer 3 meals and 2-3 planned, sit-down snacks per day, spaced 2-3 hours apart.
- Offer only water in between. This will help kids to have an appetite for meal and snack times.

Adults decide *where* to serve meals and snacks.

- Gather everyone together to share a meal or snack.
- Eat together at a table, in a circle of chairs, or on a blanket.
- Turn off the TV and put the toys and devices aside.
- Focus on eating and on connecting with each other.
- Make meal and snack times pleasant.

Eating roles for kids

Kids decide *if*, and how much, they are going to eat.

- Kids' appetites vary. The amount they eat will vary from meal to meal, day to day, and child to child.
- They may not always eat at every meal or snack time.
- We can trust that they know how much to eat.
- Serve small amounts to start, and allow seconds (or more).
- Ask: "Would you like more?"
- Ask: "Are you all done?"

"What should I do if she refuses to eat?"

If your kid does not eat at a meal or snack time, let them know that there won't be food offered until the next scheduled meal or snack time. They might not be happy about that, but they won't starve either. They will learn to adapt to the meal and snack schedule.



More Common Questions

“If she eats very little of her meal, should she get dessert?”

Dessert should not be used as an incentive for children to finish their meals; this could cause children to eat more than what they are hungry for. If you plan to offer dessert, offer it to everyone. You can offer it at the same time as the meal. Desserts made with foods like fruit, dairy, eggs or whole grains can be nutritious.

“If I let him have his way, all he would eat is “junk” food!”

Luckily, adults are in charge of the menu! It's okay to include some less nutritious foods sometimes; offer them as part of planned meals and snacks. Treat these foods the same as you would other foods – that helps to make them less of a “treat” to kids.

“He has suddenly stopped eating meat. What do I do?”

Keep offering meat if it is part of meals, without pressure. There are other foods that offer similar nutrients as meat, such as eggs, fish, poultry, kidney beans, chickpeas, tofu, lentils, and peanut butter. Offer some of these foods as part of other meals and snacks.

“Should I “sneak” vegetables into sauces or mixed dishes?”

Hiding vegetables won't help kids learn to like those foods. Worse, if kids feel tricked into eating something they are not yet comfortable with, they could become suspicious about the foods you offer. Prepare foods the way you normally do and be honest about what you are serving.

“Should I get my kids to take at least one bite of everything on their plate?”

This is pressure. It could make coming to the table unpleasant. If your kid is not yet ready to try a food, it is still good learning for them to see their role models eating it.



northern health
the northern way of caring



#healthynorth

northernhealth.ca

10-421-6038 (IND Rev. 11/19)

To speak with a
Registered Dietitian at
HealthLink BC, call 811
(or 604-215-8110)

For more information, see:
www.ellynsatterinstitute.org