

**Finicky eaters**  
**Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Kid eating behavior is one of the “control” areas of childhood—with the children usually controlling what is or isn’t eaten, and Mom and Dad feeling either pleased (if lucky), frustrated (if the child is consistently picky) or downright frightened (if the pediatrician notes a lack of proper weight gain or weight maintenance). The problem is often based in youngsters’ tendencies to be able to eat very little, yet still have the energy to run circles around their folks. To make matters worse, kid taste buds change as they mature, so that what was pleasant at 18 months may be perceived by Junior as downright yucky at 36 months of age. And, to even complicate the whole scenario, a French fry may be treasured yesterday, but snubbed today.

What’s cooking here? Well, kids are kids and parents are grown-ups and each has their own take on the nutrition situation. If you’re one of those who envisioned placing three squares on the table each day, and your children joyfully eating them, you’ve probably already experienced how exasperating this problem can be. What seems to worry folks the most are those children whose parents perceive that they may not be eating in a healthy fashion, and therefore are becoming mal- or under-nourished, possibly facing future medical problems. First, before deciding by yourself that the kid has scurvy or some equally scary disorder, check with your pediatrician. Most likely you’ll be assured that your child’s height and weight are fine for his or her build and genetics. Even though the child may eat like a bird, kids generally do not need nearly as much food as we, their wiser (and much heavier) parents feel that they do. As long as the kid is on “the chart” don’t waste your time worrying about it. Make sure that the youngster takes a good daily vitamin (suggested by your pediatrician), drinks enough liquids each day and actually enjoys some of the meals.

Now, how about the child who will readily eat, but has a repertoire of perhaps three proteins (chicken nuggets, pizza and macaroni and cheese), two veggies (French fries and green peas), three fruits (grapes, apples and bananas), tons of starches (bagels, French fries again, cookies and cakes) as well as a real sweet tooth for candy and ice cream. Well, try to work within your child’s likes and dislikes in a reasonable fashion (make or buy “lightly breaded” chicken nuggets, thin pizza with extra tomato and perhaps some lower fat cheese, and check out the lower carb macaroni that is now readily available). Let your kids know that you are not a short-order cook and that you’ll make dinner as palatable as possible, but it’s also for the adults. They are encouraged to try the foods you cook (generally kids like meats plain, without a lot of sauces, and likewise for the veggies). Place a *small amount* of food on their plates, so that if they want more they are welcome to “seconds”, but that the initial portion looks more palatable and less aversive to them. Encourage them to eat what they’d like, and then if they are absolutely nixing your concoction—that’s fine but the rules are: they must be polite in rejecting the food (saying, “I’d rather not eat this” rather than “That’s yucky!”). Next, they are in charge of preparing their own meal (and it will probably be of the microwave variety—lots of healthier stuff is available these days). Finally, they must thoroughly clean up after

themselves. Remember, you are the mom or dad, not the maid. If they desire, eating a bowl of Cheerios and milk at dinner a few times a week won't hurt, and it's easy for them to prepare and clean up. After supper, if the child is hungry, limit the snacks to healthy foods such as fruits, yogurts, or veggies. If they snub their nose at those, then they can go to bed without having a snack. Remember, lack of snack never hurt anyone.

Finally, please come to a compromised position with your spouse on this issue. It's not wise to "discuss" (or argue) about your child's eating issues at the dinner table, especially if one parent is willing to let the child make his own meal and the other parent is tending toward sending the child to the bedroom if dinner is not completely finished or there's some okra still left on the plate. Trust me; the kid will sit there until *your* bedtime just to prove that he's not going to eat the darned stuff. Just take it away, either allow him to make something more enticing (and clean up his mess), or "close the kitchen" and only those eating what you are serving are fed. If you'd like to offer a dessert only to those who eat well (not defined as stuff themselves), then that's fine also, but I wouldn't put too much emphasis on finishing every last bite. There are too many of us overweight adults walking around who began some mighty bad habits "finishing every last bite" and still continue to do so!