

# Study describes behaviors, preferences of picky eaters

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Although there's no scientific definition of picky eating, parents say they know it when they see it. Now a University of Illinois study shows that picky eaters do exhibit definable preferences and mealtime behaviors.

Why is this important? "If we better understand the behaviors that [parents](#) associate with picky eating, we can develop specific recommendations targeted at those behaviors. Not all picky eaters are created equal," said Sharon Donovan, a U of I professor of nutrition.

The new study showed that kids deemed picky eaters by their parents did react differently to common foods and behaved differently at mealtime than kids whose parents said their kids weren't choosy. The differences were significant and occurred across 16 assessed behaviors, according to U of I sensory scientist Soo-Yeun Lee.

The two-week study investigated differences in picky eaters' and non-picky eaters' behaviors and [food](#) selections. Parents of 170 two- to four-year-olds observed their children's responses to five standardized meals brought into participants' homes, evaluating their behavior in real time, not from memory. At the beginning of the study, 83 children were described by their parents as picky eaters; 87 children were not.

Significant differences existed between the two groups, with the behavior of picky eaters ranging from simple suspicion of an unfamiliar food to cringing, crying, and gagging, Lee said.

"Non-picky eaters on average were perceived by their parents to have consumed more of the meal and had higher acceptance scores for most of the foods evaluated. They also displayed significantly fewer negative behaviors—they were more 'willing to come to the table to eat' and 'participate in mealtime conversation,'" she said.

Lee explained that picky eaters can be divided into four groups:

(1) Sensory-Dependent Eaters, who reject a food because it's mushy, slippery, bitter, or lumpy; (2) Behavioral Responders, who cringe or gag when food's not prepared in the "right" way or refuse to come to the table at mealtime; (3) Preferential Eaters, who won't try new foods and avoid foods that are mixed or have complex ingredients; and (4) General Perfectionists (by far the largest group), who have very specific needs, little variety in their diet, and may insist that foods not touch each other.

Are there strategies parents can use to broaden their child's eating horizons? "A parent's response to pickiness can determine how bad the behavior will be and how long it will persist. Don't let every meal become a battle," Donovan said.

Lee too cautioned against mealtime strategies that may aggravate the behavior. "Requiring kids to eat their broccoli before they can have dessert may simply give the child negative feelings about broccoli in the long run. The child then regards broccoli as something he has to get through to get a reward."

Donovan said that food preferences are established early in life. "Studies conducted at the U of I in the 1980s showed that exposing kids to different flavors, textures, and food groups was linked to better acceptance of those foods," she said.

The researchers suggest serving a new item with a food the child likes

and taking apart combined foods like sandwiches and casseroles to show what the dish contains.

"Some parents give up on a food if their child rejects it two or three times, but we encourage parents to keep exposing the child to the food. Don't pressure them to eat it but show them that parents and siblings are eating the food and enjoying it," Donovan said.

Also, realize that a certain amount of this behavior can be attributed to a toddler's developmental stage, Donovan said.

"Picky eating peaks between two and three, and at this age, children simply don't like new things. They're afraid of strangers, and they're also less accepting of new foods," she said.

Lee added, "There's a continuum here, and one parent may deem a certain behavior picky while another parent would not. When you slot your child into a negative category, the way you approach that issue is so different than if you accept the behavior as part of the child's normal development."

Although picky eating behaviors are not the same in each child, the study suggests that patterns are emerging that can be used to characterize different types of picky eaters. The researchers' long-term goal is to develop specific strategies for the different types of behaviors for parents to try, Donovan explained.

"In the meantime, trust your child's ability to eat what and how much they need," she added. "The best thing parents can do is be gatekeepers over what food comes into the house, then let the [child](#) decide what she is going to consume, and allow for the occasional treat."

"Mealtime Behaviors and Food Consumption of Perceived Picky and

Nonpicky Eaters through Home Use Test" appears in the November 2014 issue of the Journal of Food Science. The U of I's Mandy Boquin, Sarah Smith-Simpson, Sharon M. Donovan, and Soo-Yeun Lee co-authored the article.

**More information:** Boquin, M. M., Moskowitz, H. R., Donovan, S. M. and Lee, S.-Y. (2014), "Defining Perceptions of Picky Eating Obtained through Focus Groups and Conjoint Analysis." *Journal of Sensory Studies*, 29: 126–138. doi: 10.1111/joss.12088

Mandy Boquin, Sarah Smith-Simpson, Sharon M. Donovan, and Soo-Yeun Lee, "Mealtime behaviors and food consumption of perceived picky and nonpicky eaters through home use test," *Journal of Food Science*, vol. 79, no. 11, 2014, [DOI: 10.1111/1750-3841.12698](https://doi.org/10.1111/1750-3841.12698)

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