

Professor discusses how to help a picky eater

March 2 2017, by Tyra Haag

Many parents and caregivers are distressed by what their children eat—or don't eat. However, most kids get plenty of variety and nutrition in their diets over the course of a week, according to Lee Murphy, a nutrition professor at UT.

Until a [child](#)'s food preferences mature, Murphy suggested these tips to prevent mealtime battles one bite at a time:

Respect the child's hunger—or lack thereof. Young children tend to eat only when they're hungry. If a child isn't hungry, don't force a meal or snack.

Stay calm. If the child senses that you're unhappy with his or her eating habits, it may become a battle of wills. Threats and punishments only reinforce the power struggle.

Keep an eye on the clock. Nix juice and snacks for at least one hour before meals. If a child comes to the table hungry, he or she may be more motivated to eat.

Don't expect too much. After age two, slower growth often reduces a child's appetite. A few bites may be all it takes for the child to feel full.

Limit liquid calories. Low-fat or fat-free dairy products and 100 percent fruit juice can be important parts of a healthy diet, but if a child fills up on milk or juice, he or she may have no room for meals or snacks.

Start small. Offer several foods in small portions. Let the child choose what he or she eats.

Boycott the clean plate club. Don't force a child to clean his or her plate. This may only ignite—or reinforce—a power struggle over food. Instead, allow the child to stop eating when he or she is full.

Be patient with new foods. Young children often touch or smell new foods, and may even put tiny bites in their mouths and then take them back out again. A child may need repeated exposure to a new food before he or she takes the first bite.

Set a good example. If you consume a variety of healthy foods (and beverages), the child is more likely to follow suit.

Know when to seek help. If a child is energetic and growing, he or she is probably doing fine. Consult the child's doctor if you're concerned that picky eating is compromising his or her growth and development or if certain foods seem to make the child ill. If limited food consumption is long term, supplements may need to be considered as well.

"A child's [eating habits](#) won't likely change overnight," says Murphy. "But small steps each day can help promote a lifetime of healthy eating."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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