

Parents: Think twice before you pressure your picky eater

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Seriously, does anyone really like peas? More importantly, should parents pressure kids to eat them anyway, and does it hurt or help the child?

Parents struggle mightily with this question, and a recent University of Michigan study clears up some of the confusion, says Julie Lumeng, director of the U-M Center for Human Growth and Development and a physician at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital.

Lumeng's group found that pressuring [kids](#) to eat food they don't like and [picky eating](#) go hand-in-hand, but insisting kids eat those foods isn't linked to the behavior or their weight changing. However, using coercion can cause meal-time tension and could damage the parent-child relationship.

The study, appearing in the journal *Appetite*, set out to answer several questions: Should parents pressure kids to eat, and what are the consequences for kids' weight and picky eating? Will the child learn she must eat everything, resulting in obesity, or will learning to eat veggies and other healthy foods help her avoid weight gain?

Lumeng, said both scenarios make sense, but the study found that neither happens.

"In a nutshell, we found that over a year of life in toddlerhood, weight remained stable on the growth chart whether they were picky eaters or not," Lumeng said. "The kids' picky eating also was not very changeable. It stayed the same whether parents pressured their picky eaters or not.

"Then we asked if pressuring led to a decrease in picky eating, and it didn't. There was no link between pressuring and picky eating and any of these other outcomes."

Lumeng recalls an anecdote from her own childhood.

"One night at dinner, my mom served both of my sisters peas, but she served me carrots. She said to me, with such loving kindness, 'I'm

serving you carrots because you don't like peas.' I felt very loved and respected, and I will always remember that she said that," Lumeng said.

Nowadays, appetite researchers prefer the terms choosy or selective over the loaded term picky. Lumeng notes that we don't call selective adults picky, but we hold kids to a different standard even though taste is at least somewhat hardwired and beyond our control to change at any age.

"The takeaway here is that pressuring children to eat needs to be done with caution and we don't have much evidence that it helps with much," she said. "As a parent, if you pressure, you need to make sure you're doing it in a way that's good for the relationship with your child."

Researchers have studied this topic for 10-15 years, and Lumeng wondered if her team's findings were the exception. But after comparing theirs with roughly a dozen other eating behavior studies, they found similar conclusions.

"There are some things that researchers and the public just really want to be true, and when researchers do studies and they don't find them to be true, sometimes researchers just keep researching the topic hoping to find some evidence that it's true," Lumeng said. "Half the value of this paper is the findings, but the other half is seeing how our findings compare to other studies."

So, is picky eating important? Yes, Lumeng says, but only in the sense that it's unsettling and frustrating for parents, and inconvenient. It's rarely a health issue that's associated with nutrient deficiencies and poor growth. In the end, it's just not a serious behavior flaw that [parents](#) should expend lots of energy to eliminate, she says.

"Dealing with picky eating falls into the category of how can you do little things that might make meals better for everyone, but not squelch

something that may be part of your child's personality," she said.

The study has several limitations, Lumeng said: There was high attrition in the study population, and results might not be generalizable to other populations outside low-income toddlers. There's debate on how to best measure picky eating and the study measures included a variety of measures reflecting reluctance to eat both new foods and familiar foods.

More information: Julie C. Lumeng et al. Picky eating, pressuring feeding, and growth in toddlers, *Appetite* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2017.12.020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.12.020)

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