



# Preventing and Managing Picky Eating

Teachers often serve at least one meal and snacks to older infants and toddlers, and sometimes serve food as many as four or five times a day. The way teachers interact with children during these times can have a huge impact on preventing or managing picky eating. This handout has a few key strategies that can help prevent and manage picky eating.

## *But first... what is picky eating?*

- Most toddlers will naturally become selective in the foods they choose to eat, often between 12-18 months. This is one way they exert their growing sense of independence and self-awareness. Some people consider this picky eating, but it's actually a **healthy developmental stage** that can be supported with the strategies in this handout.
- Picky eating, on the other hand, is when children will only accept a small number of foods in their diet.
- Picky eating can be a concerning and frustrating experience for both families and teachers. The stress associated with picky eating often worsens the situation, as it creates more anxiety around eating.
- For babies, the following strategies can go a long way to promoting a **positive association with eating** and **acceptance of a wide range of foods** early on, ideally before the first birthday. So when they become more selective toddlers, there will still be a variety of foods they have previously been exposed to that they are likely to continue to accept.
- For picky eaters, the following strategies can be used to help children **gradually expand the number of foods** they'll accept.



## Strategy 1: Share control

- When learning to eat solids from a spoon and/or finger foods, **allow older babies to self-feed** whenever possible. Babies are sometimes more apt to try new things when they can do part of it themselves. Additionally, they are practicing many important feeding skills when they are allowed to self-feed.
- Caregivers can load purées onto a spoon and place the spoon on the tray within the baby’s reach. Finger foods can be placed directly on the tray for babies to **explore with their hands and bring to their mouths**. Ensure finger foods are cut or cooked to soft textures that do not pose a choking risk.
- When self-feeding is not possible, practice **responsive feeding**—continue to **watch for cues** as the baby lets you know when they want more or have had enough, or want to be fed more slowly or more quickly.

## Strategy 2: Remove pressure to eat

- Caregivers should **never pressure** a child to eat or taste food. Saying things like “You need to eat it” and “Let’s finish our plate” can promote anxiety around eating, which may lead to or worsen picky eating.
- The vast majority of children have an innate ability to listen to their bodies and know when they are hungry and full. Trust that ability and always **let children decide when they are done** eating.
- **Remain flexible**, as selective and picky eating is often a temporary phase and shifts over time. For example, toddlers may accept certain foods and then not accept those same foods for a while.
- Keep mealtime a **relaxed, fun experience** to promote a positive association with eating and trying new foods.

## Strategy 3: Encourage exploration of new foods

Removing pressure to eat is very important, but there are other ways to encourage children to explore new foods!

- Simply exposing children to new foods is an important first step. They may not touch the food or they may touch it but not eat it; regardless, this exposure is still a win! If we **expose children to new foods multiple times** in relaxed ways, most children will taste the food eventually. Patience is key.
- When babies seem disinterested in a new food, offering a loaded spoon or finger food **at baby’s eye level** can help draw a baby’s attention to it and promote interest in grasping the spoon or food. Let the baby take the spoon or food from your hand and bring it to their mouth. Place the food back on the tray if the baby doesn’t show interest.
- With toddlers, **talk about** the colors and textures of foods, talk about how they are grown or where they come from, and cut or arrange foods into fun shapes like stars or animals to promote interest. These mealtime conversations should be relaxed and playful, without pressure to actually taste the food.
- Teachers aren’t always able to eat the same foods as children in their care, but if an opportunity arises, take advantage! **Watching you eat nutritious foods** is highly motivating for young children to explore the food themselves.
- **Offering two or three choices** of nutritious foods on a plate is a great way to work with toddlers’ new sense of independence instead of working against it. When possible, *work with* your program or families to allow toddlers to have choices at mealtime. And be okay with their choices of what and how much to eat!



## Strategy 4: Hold boundaries in a caring way

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- As toddlers become selective, they may start to ask for something other than what has been served. Giving in to these requests can worsen picky eating as their acceptance of foods becomes narrower.
- The best strategy is to offer food choices and then **hold a boundary but with warmth and understanding**: “I hear that you would like puffs right now. This is what we have for lunch today. You don’t have to eat it, but we’ll sit here together while our other friends eat.” If the desired food is planned for another meal, you can help them look forward to it: “This is what we are having for lunch. We’ll have puffs at snack time.”
- It’s normal if toddlers become upset. Comfort them as needed but hold the boundary in a caring way. Over time, they’ll become more accepting of this boundary.

## Strategy 5: Embrace the mess

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Allowing toddlers and older babies to self-feed is undoubtedly messy, and it can feel really overwhelming to have to clean up after them.

- Older babies and young toddlers will want to explore and play with foods before tasting them. As much as you can, **allow them to explore freely**, even if it creates a mess. The sensory experience of exploring **how food feels and smells** helps young children become more comfortable with new foods.
- Work with your program to strategize ways to make cleanup easier, like investing in good bibs or splash mats to put on the table or floor.
- Resist the urge to clean children as they are eating. Having your face or hands wiped isn’t always a pleasant experience, and if done repeatedly during mealtime, it can lead to a negative association with eating. **Wait to clean up** until they are finished eating.

## Strategy 6: Share these strategies with families

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- **Partner with families** to create positive eating experiences and exposure to a wide range of foods at both home and at your program. **Share** some of the strategies from this handout with families and **ask them** what is working well at home.
- Share with families that highly selective toddlers may feel less anxious about a meal when they are served a new food alongside a food they prefer. This can lead to trying new foods on the plate! However, let families know that serving only preferred foods can further reduce the number of foods children accept and worsen picky eating. An essential part of preventing and managing picky eating is continued exposure to a wide variety of nutritious foods.
- Families from different backgrounds and/or cultures may have different expectations and priorities when it comes to their children acquiring self-help skills, including independent eating. For example, some parents may expect adults to hand feed children for several years or expect children to eat certain foods with their fingers instead of utensils. Some parents may expect children to eat everything they send, even if portions are unrealistic, or may not like the idea of letting children play with their food. Talk to parents to **get to know more about** how they support their children at home and what their **expectations are for their children’s eating and self-feeding**. Share some of the benefits of self-feeding when possible. **Collaborate and come to agreement** about ways to support the child at school and home.
- Picky eating can be a very challenging experience for everyone involved. Support families with **kindness and compassion**.



## Strategy 7: Refer for professional help

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- If a child is routinely refusing food and exhibiting a lot of anxiety during mealtimes, ask families if they have shared this concern with their pediatrician. Pediatricians may refer children for further evaluation and/or feeding therapy to address severe picky eating.
- Pediatricians and pediatric nutritionists can also be useful resources if families have questions about the types of foods and portion sizes that are appropriate to feed to babies and toddlers.

## References

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