

Feeding Your Picky Eater
By Capt. Allison Sweet
Special to Guidon

FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. (Nov. 2012) – Mealtime can be a frustrating and challenging experience for parents who worry about whether their children are eating enough, or getting the right nutrition.

It's common for children to go through some stage of picky eating as they try new foods and develop independence.

But parents can reduce stress at the dinner table and encourage a picky eater to eat a balanced diet by following a few general guidelines.

Do not use food as part of a punishment or reward system

Using a food as part of a punishment or reward system can teach your child to have an unhealthy relationship with food. Offering sweets as a reward sends the message that sweets are the best food, which can in turn increase the desire to eat sweets and make it difficult to accept healthier options.

Respect their appetite

Your child simply may not be hungry. Forcing your child to eat may create a power struggle over food or anxiety for your child during mealtime. Allow your child to serve themselves, or serve them small portions, and permit them the opportunity to ask for more.

Be consistent, firm, and don't give up

Use the same routine and times for each mealtime. Offer plenty of encouragement and praise. Don't give in to stubbornness. Offering a new meal or snack immediately after your child rejects the initial meal encourages your child to be a picky eater.

Be patient

Children often need to be exposed to the same new food several times before they eat it without an issue. Offer the new food once and then again in a week or month. Do not give up. Some children have to be exposed to a new food many times, maybe even 15 times. Allow your child to touch it and/or smell it even if they don't eat it. Serve one new food at a time and with other foods that your child already enjoys.

Be a good role model

Children mimic parents and peers. Eat at least some of all the food choices that you serve your child. Eat your meals at the same time and location with your child.

Be creative. Be sneaky!

Create edible art for your child. For example, use giant cookie cutters to make fun shapes in your child's sandwiches or make ants on a log using celery, cream cheese, and raisins. For super picky eaters, try to sneak healthy food choices into foods that your child already likes to eat.

Create a positive, fun meal environment

Include your child in a conversation during mealtime—let them be an active participant in the meal experience. Do not yell or punish your child during a meal for not eating.

Get your child on board

When children are involved in the meal process, they are more likely to accept new foods. The next time you go to the grocery store, encourage your child to pick out a fruit or vegetable. When preparing a meal have your child help with the preparation, such as washing the vegetables or set the table.

Minimize distractions

Serve and eat meals in a designated eating area, such as the dining room. Put away or turn off all items that can distract from the meal, such as TV, games or toys. Children can become easily distracted, making it more of a challenge to get your child to eat.

Reduce grazing

Children who are constantly offered food throughout the day will not be hungry at meal time, hence more likely not to be willing to try new foods. Establish clearly defined meal and snack times. Allow at least an hour to pass after your child has rejected a meal to offer a healthy snack.

These general guidelines can help increase the variety of healthy foods in your picky eater's diet but, more than likely, it will not be an instantaneous change. It will take time and patience. If this method doesn't work for you and you are still concerned that your child's food habits are affecting their growth and development, speak to your child's doctor.

(Editor's note: Capt. Allison Sweet is the chief of nutrition education at the General Leonard Wood Army Community Hospital)