

Parenting the Picky Eater



by Maggie Tai Tucker

Living in Shanghai is a unique opportunity for your child to experience foods from around the region - *xiao long bao*, dragon fruit, and Peking duck. But what about the child who won't try anything unfamiliar, the child who rejects entire food groups, or the child who seems to be on a "white diet" of bread, French fries, and yogurt?

The first step in addressing selective eating is to determine the reason for it. Reasons may fall into physical, medical, or behavioral categories, or a combination of two or more of these categories. Some factors that

may affect a child's eating include: oral-motor coordination problems, prematurity, medical interventions such as hospitalizations or surgery, untreated reflux, nausea as a side effect of medication, frequent constipation, tactile sensory sensitivities, and rigid behavior patterns.

Even when the problem is physical in origin, the selective eating may place quite a strain on family dynamics around the dinner table, which can then make the problem worse. It's important to avoid being trapped in this type of negative downward spiral - or if you're in one, to break out of it.

Here's what doesn't help: threats, punishments, force feeding, making kids stay at the table until they clean their plates, bribing with sweets, or cooking special meals just for that child. You may win the battle (i.e., the chicken gets eaten) but you will lose the war (the child's eating habits will not improve and may actually get worse).

Here's what does help: figuring out the root of the problem - either on your own, or with help from a pediatrician, occupational therapist, or speech therapist with knowledge of feeding issues - and then taking a creative approach to addressing it.

Among the most common factors I see in my practice are tactile sensory sensitivities and rigid behavior patterns. With tactile issues, the basic approach is twofold. One approach is to gradually accustom a child to new textures. Start with a food that they do accept and change one variable about it, such as cutting round carrot slices that are wavy instead of straight, eventually either changing the texture further or extending this new texture to other foods (wavy melon slices, wavy apple slices).

Another approach is to give more information about foods and about your own sensory experience of eating them. One study found that children at a salad bar took far more of items if they were labeled with information about the taste and texture. At your family table, you can provide this information by taking the first bite of a food and then neutrally commenting on its sensory properties - "Hmm, this dragon fruit is cold and tastes lemony. The little seeds don't have a taste, but they make the fruit crunch between my teeth."

When a child's behavior around food is very inflexible, I often recommend negotiating a behavioral contract with the child. For example: "If you agree to try one new food every weekend, and one new food during the school week, I will not press you to try new foods at

other times." Or "if you agree to eat a small bowl of one vegetable from the choices available at dinner every night, I will not push you to eat any other vegetables." As a parent, you have to honor your half of this bargain or else it will rapidly become null and void.

Another approach is to find non-threatening ways to get the child to interact with new foods. For example, do a "taste test" of various types of apples, with each family member writing comments or awarding stars to the different varieties. If dad is not home yet, leave it set up for him to take part when he arrives. Or adapt a children's board game so that everyone (including the adult player) has to try a food from the red plate when they land on a red square. I sometimes use a "Brag Plate" where children can place stickers commemorating new foods they've tried during the previous week (think scouting badges).

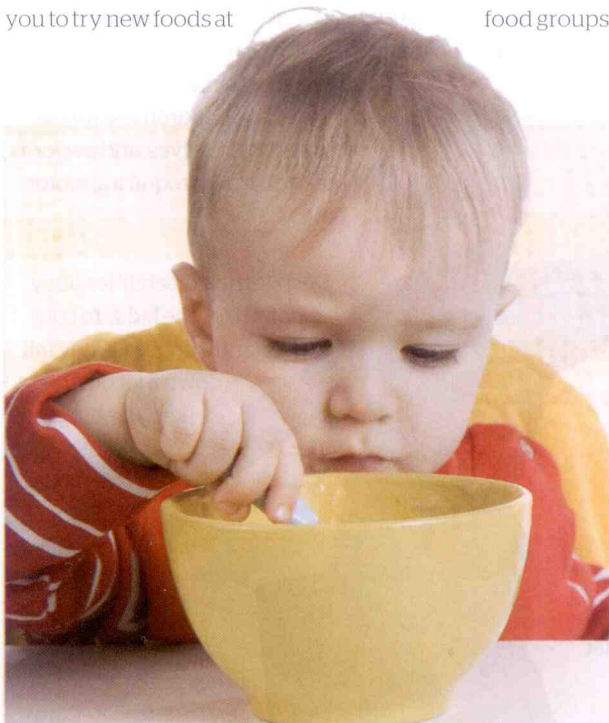
There is a line between picky eating, which is a fairly common childhood phenomenon, and problem eating, in which a child's food repertoire and food intake is so limited that it is an actual health problem. Psychologist Kay Toomey draws the line here: A problem eater eats fewer than 20 foods; eats fewer and fewer foods over time; refuses certain textures or entire food groups; goes on "food jags" with one

very favored food, but then rejects the food and does not return to it; will not tolerate even touching or tasting a new food; will not eat a food after 10 exposures; tantrums when new foods are presented; chokes, coughs, or vomits during meals; fails to eat enough to keep energy up; and fails to grow or gain appropriately as determined by a pediatrician.

One last key concept for parents of both picky eaters and problem eaters is the Division of Responsibility proposed by Ellyn Satter, who is both a nutritionist and psychotherapist. Her web site, <http://www.ellynsatter.com> is full of useful tips for parents of infants through teenagers.

According to Satter, the parent is responsible for the what, when, and where of eating. The child is responsible for how much and whether. To paraphrase an old expression, you can lead your child to a bowl of fabulous wonton soup, but you can't make him drink. But if you can create a fun, relaxed eating environment, your child may well take that next step by himself. 🍽️

Maggie Tai Tucker is an occupational therapist and a co-founder of Olivia's Place (www.oliviasplace.org), a pediatric therapy center. She has authored a book about feeding therapy and is the creator of a children's board game about eating (www.mealtimestories.com).



Spotlight on Picky Eaters

Researchers studying children's eating behavior have found:

1. Up to 25% of typically developing children experience eating problems at some point.
2. Children in one study ate more during an intervention focused on improving mealtime interactions, and less during an intervention focused on increasing caloric intake.
3. Girls eat more fruits and vegetables when their parents do - and eat fewer fruits and vegetables if they are pressured to eat these foods.
4. When researchers told preschoolers neutrally "finish your soup, please," the preschoolers consumed less soup and made more negative comments about the soup compared to a group that wasn't reminded to finish the soup.

For details on these studies, go to <http://www.mealtimestories.com> and click on references.