

Picky Eater #1: The Regressor

You were the just-a-little-bit-smug parent who humble-bragged about how well your baby ate. Then, suddenly, at age 2, they lost all interest in previously loved foods, and mealtimes became power struggles. Was all that palate training in vain?

What's Going On: Studies show that the more flavors babies try, the more likely they are to enjoy a wide variety of foods when they get older—but that means when they're approaching double digits and beyond. By the time they're 18 months, you should expect the unexpected. One reason is that kids' appetites vary because their growth rate slows dramatically. "Your child may eat a lot at one meal and very little at another, and that's OK," says Katja Rowell, M.D., a childhood-feeding specialist and author of *Helping Your Child With Extreme Picky Eating*.

Melanie Potock, a pediatric speech-language pathologist, feeding specialist, and author of *Adventures in Veggieland*, adds, "At this age, a child learns that he has a lot of control over his parents' behavior, and that can be fun!" Rejecting foods is one way to exert their toddler power.

What To Do About It: When your child rejects foods they loved the day before, you'll be tempted to cross them off the dinner list. Don't! "He may come back to them next week or month (or year) but only if you keep them in your repertoire," says Dr. Rowell. The key to turning the tide is to keep things chill. That means not pressuring your kid to take a bite but still serving the food in new ways.

Picky Eater# 2: The Flavor Hater

Your 2-year-old will eat only über-plain foods like bread and butter, crackers, and cereal with milk. Once in a blue moon, you can coax them to eat a few bites of scrambled eggs, but the process is exhausting. Are you destined to serve only bland foods forever?

What's Going On: Many toddlers have a natural aversion to strongly flavored foods, and that's actually an evolutionary advantage. When our ancestors were old enough to wander away from their cave-parents, it would have been disastrous if they tried every leaf in the landscape. So kids get choosier as they become more mobile, especially when it comes to bold, bitter flavors (veggies, we're looking at you). And when kids start to get picky, it's easy for parents to offer mostly simple, bland food. "However, if you cater to those preferences, children are less likely to expand beyond this limited range of flavors," notes Karen Le Billon, food educator and author of *Getting to Yum*.

What To Do About It: Instead of sticking with the guaranteed wins every day, try to slowly train your child's taste buds to enjoy more complex flavors. If your kid likes pasta with butter, offer it with olive oil. Once that's accepted, add some Parmesan cheese. "When I introduced a Thai curry chicken to my daughters, I used more coconut milk at first, then gradually upped the curry," says Le Billon. You don't need to announce these changes. But if your kid asks, you shouldn't lie. Le Billon adds, "Kids learn by imitation and are also reassured when their parents are obviously enjoying the same food."

Of course, not all kids will attempt a new taste no matter how you prepare it, so let them get comfortable by smelling, touching, and licking foods first. "Involving your child with meal prep helps because she'll get to experience the food without having to eat it," notes Potock. "Crafting with food is another fun way to explore it. Build a house with asparagus or create a broccoli jungle. It's also a great idea to pick up a set of small spoons, which give kids more control when they do decide they're ready to try a bite."

Picky Eater #3: The Guzzler

Your 3-year-old would much rather drink than eat. Then they drink mostly milk throughout the day. You think it's just a phase, and hey, at least they're drinking milk! But they aren't very interested in solid foods at mealtime.

What's Going On: "This is a common issue because young children have one priority: playing! It's much quicker to gulp down a drink than to sit and eat at the table," says Potock. "Since parents consider milk to be nutritious, they don't worry about serving plenty of it. Then, suddenly, their kid is in the habit of drinking milk all day." While milk is a healthy drink option, it can fill your kid up, which means they're less likely to eat a wide and varied diet. It's a good idea to check in with your pediatrician if your child is a liquid lover. "Some children who prefer liquids have an undetected tongue tie or motor delays that make it difficult to bite or chew," notes Potock.

What To Do About It: Once those issues are ruled out, rethink your beverage routine. Give your child a small cup of milk only at mealtime. If they drink all the milk first, next time give them a little water with the meal instead, and then the milk after they eat, Potock recommends. You can also discuss with your pediatrician if you should offer your child a nutrition shake like PediaSure Grow & Gain with their breakfast if they prefer to sip instead of eat, so they get a variety of essential nutrients. Between meals, water is the way to go.

And since your child's preference for drinks probably means they're eager to get up from the table, it may also be helpful to set a timer for seven to 10 minutes and ask them to sit with the family for just that long. Then they can go play, whether or not they have eaten or everyone else is finished. You can gradually add minutes to their table time.

Picky Eater #4: The Super Feeler

Your 2-year-old has big-time texture hang-ups. They think carrots are too hard, yogurt is too slimy, and cucumbers are too smooth. It seems like every meal is a struggle to find foods that they'll tolerate.

What's Going On: Discomfort with textures is a typical problem for good reason: "Young kids have a wide range in chewing ability," says Le Billon. "Their teeth, jaws, and surrounding muscles are still developing, and they may not feel in control when some foods are in their mouth. So they reject them."

What To Do About It: Proper seating can be a big help. "Young children can chew more effectively when their core muscles are supported by their feet," Le Billon explains, "so give your child a stool to rest her feet on when sitting at the table instead of letting them dangle." (Or invest in a junior chair that can live at the table. We like the IKEA Urban Junior Chair.)

And experiment with different textures. Instead of serving either raw or mushy veggies, try blanching them for a happy medium, Potock suggests. Drop them into boiling water for a few minutes, then transfer them to a bowl of ice water. This process makes the veggies tender, with just a little crunch. Then cut them into very small cubes and start by asking your child to put a bite on their molars. "Children feel safer if they can feel the food against their teeth," she notes. "And the flavor won't be as intense and overwhelming as it is on their tongue, where all the taste buds are."

If chewy meat is an unpleasant texture for your child, bake, roast, or use a slow cooker or a pressure cooker so meats are melt-in-your-mouth soft. Beef or turkey meatballs can be a good option, too, as long as they are very moist. Serve gravy or sauce on the side if your child prefers to dip.

Picky Eater #5: The Gagger

Your 4-year-old eats a grand total of seven foods. When you're successful in persuading them to try something new, they always gag—which is unpleasant for both of you. It makes them less likely to try new foods and you less likely to serve them.

What's Going On: For many kids, gagging can be a sign that mealtime has gotten too stressful. Your child may be having a dramatic reaction to efforts to "get" them to eat. Dr. Rowell adds, "If he has had difficult, unpleasant, or painful experiences related to food, such as severe reflux, constipation, a scary choking episode, or coercive and forceful feeding, that can be a factor too."

However, frequent gagging could also be a red flag that your child has oral-motor or sensory issues. Oral-motor skills refer to a child's ability to move their lips, jaw, tongue, and facial muscles in an age-appropriate manner. "If your child has a sensory issue, he may either under- or overreact to a sense," Potock explains. "He may think he needs to stuff his cheeks with food in order to truly feel it in his mouth or gag at the slightest change in texture."

What To Do About It: To explore whether your child has an oral-motor or sensory issue, talk to your pediatrician. A referral to an occupational therapist or a speech-language pathologist who specializes in feeding difficulties may be the next step. Known as feeding therapists, these pros will review your child's feeding history, growth, and development and evaluate their eating behaviors and skills in various situations. They may coach you on how to help them at home—or work with them directly with techniques that should be both gentle and fun—to gradually overcome any challenges. (Many insurance plans cover this treatment.)

If you rule out an oral-motor or sensory problem, try involving your child with the food at the table without any pressure. One of Potock's favorite strategies is to make your child the family's "master server." Rather than passing serving bowls around, put them in front of them with a big serving spoon and a smaller spoon in each dish. Have your child ask each family member, "Do you want one scoop or two? A big scoop or a small scoop?" then put the requested amount on each person's plate. "This way, he's exposed to the food through his eyes, ears, and nose before ever tasting it," Potock says. "The added sensory exposure may help pique his curiosity and make mealtime fun instead of stressful. Plus, with a small spoon as an option, a child is more likely to put a little on his own plate."

Picky Eater #6: The Untouchable

Your toddler likes a variety of flavors (phew!), but they're extremely picky about how their food is presented. Heaven forbid they're served a casserole! They'll eat only if every ingredient is in a separate small pile on their plate with not a millimeter touching.

What's Going In: When your child prefers dishes deconstructed, is insistent about the way a food is cut up, or doesn't want foods to touch, it's usually a control issue, Potock says. "It often starts with some anxiety—maybe they're nervous about starting preschool or excited about an upcoming holiday—so they already have butterflies in their stomach when they sit down to eat," she notes. "The way for her to calm down is to gain control by saying, 'I want it this way.' When you respond accordingly, it makes her feel better, and the habit is born."

What To Do About It: Serving food the way your child wants it is OK, and that can help the whole family eat the same meal (win!). But help them move beyond the deconstruction zone by explaining that everyone needs a tiny bit of taco or lasagna on their plate. Have them assemble the taco on a tiny piece of shell or serve themselves a dab of the lasagna so they have the sensory experience of handling the combined food. Don't insist they eat it, but it has to be on their plate so they get used to what it looks like. If they get upset, just stay calm and say, "We all have tacos on our plate tonight," and ask them about their latest playdate or their new pet fish. Sometimes not talking about food at the table is the best way to ensure happy meals.