

Picky eating in children

It is reckoned there are two main reasons children are picky eaters. The first is that they prefer sweet tastes over bitter tastes and secondly they are afraid to try new foods. This is thought to be a defence mechanism that is in our genes from prehistoric times as a means of survival. It stems from the need in prehistoric times to avoid poisonous plants. In prehistoric times, if a child put a berry, leaf or flower in their mouth, the bitter taste would make them spit it out. Bitter tasting plants were more likely to be poisonous while sweet foods like fruits are energy rich foods so it makes sense that evolution has given children a tendency to prefer sweet foods.

The fear of trying new foods is called neophobia. Neophobia usually develops around the age of two. Many of you will remember not liking certain foods as a child but discover as you moved into adulthood that you actually liked it; often because you never gave it a chance. I remember as a child and teenager I would not eat tomatoes or mushrooms. I didn't like the look of them so would never give them a try. I was only later when I actually gave them a try I realised I loved them.

Fruit and veg

It can be notoriously difficult to get some kids to eat the recommended "five a day" of fruit and veg. Research has shown that the more fruit and vegetables are available and easily accessible for children, the more likely they are to eat them. Therefore if fruit is chopped up and ready to eat, children will eat more of them. Providing a variety of different fruits and vegetables is one way to encourage your children towards healthy eating habits, however you must be patient. There is some evidence that children need to try new fruits and vegetables up to eight or nine times before they are liked or accepted. Being creative in the way you serve up fruit and vegetables can help. For example, prepare vegetables in different ways to vary the texture such as raw, microwaved, mashed, baked, grated into a casserole, blended up as a pasta sauce or as a soup. Even little things like cutting carrots into funny shapes may make children more interested and more likely to eat it. Serving a variety of brightly coloured foods may help as children respond to colour. Many vegetables are sweeter raw so it can be a good way to get children to eat more veg, especially their greens such as peas or green beans.

Fruit juice is often regarded as a healthy choice as it contains Vitamin C. However one small glass (125 ml) of most juices provides a child's daily requirement for Vitamin C. More than this provides excess sugar and calories that can lead to weight gain. A piece of fruit is a better choice than juice.

Fish and seafood

Fish has many health benefits including healthy omega 3's which helps brain development and protein which is important for growth and repair. Fish is low in fat. Many kids don't like fish. Starting early can help. Try serving tiny bits of salmon as one of your infant's earliest finger foods, even from as early as 9 months. It is proven that babies who enjoy certain tastes go on to enjoy them for life. Be conscious of avoiding tiny fish bones in children; as well as being potentially dangerous it can put children off fish. There are many ways to prepare and serve fish and seafood that make it more interesting for children. Examples include mixing it with other foods such as mashed potatoes or pasta, spicing it up with the likes of lemon, garlic, peppers, adding toppings like cheese or breadcrumbs, sweetening a piece of salmon with honey, using dips for the likes of fish fingers...the options are infinite. Ask our staff or check out www.whelehans.ie to find out more benefits of omega 3's for children.

Catering to different tastes

Some children like crunchy foods and some like creamy foods. If your child likes crunchy food, they may prefer raw vegetables; this also maximises the benefits of veg as cooking destroys some of the vitamins and minerals. If your child likes creamy foods, try mashing their veg. As well as potatoes, many vegetables such as carrots, parsnips, turnips and cauliflowers can be mashed.

Boiling veg is the healthiest preparation technique; however grilling or frying veg such as cauliflower or parsnips can make the veg more tasty and is an option when there seems to be no other way to get your child eat veg. An option which is healthier than frying is coating veg with a little flour, sprinkling them with a little oil (olive oil is healthier option) and baking them until they are crisp.

Stick to a routine

Have meals at the same time every day. Provide milk or juices with the meals and offer water between the means. Try to prevent your child drinking milk or juices between meals as this may affect their appetite and make them less likely to eat their meals.

Get kids involved

While doing the grocery shopping, get your child help pick the fruit and veg, fish etc. When preparing meals, get the kids involved doing things like rinsing the veg, mixing the batter, setting the table...this feeling of being involved can encourage them to eat everything they helped prepare.

Be a good role model

If a child sees their parents eating lots of fruit, veg, fish, wholegrain etc, they will be more willing to take them too. Children pick up many of their habits from their parents. If you (as a parent) don't like many healthy foods such as fruit and veg or fish, try to eat more of it for your children's benefit; ultimately your health will benefit too.

Respect your child's tastes

While it can be frustrating when your child refuses healthy food options, it must be borne in mind that everyone has foods they like and dislike. If your child refuses to eat broccoli or cabbage, don't force them to eat it. If there is a row every time they refuse a certain food, the child will have negative associations with meal times and certain foods and will make them even less likely to try new healthy options. If they have tried it and don't like it you must respect the decision. However it doesn't mean you have to give up on it. Serving that food regularly at mealtime can make a child more likely to try it and accept it with time. Try serving small portions to avoid overwhelming the child and giving the child a chance to independently ask for more.

Why is a varied diet important?

Fruit and vegetables are a good source of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre. Including more fruit and vegetables as part of a balanced diet will help your children grow and develop, improve vitality and help prevent a range of chronic diseases such as Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and cancer in later life.

Vitamin and mineral supplements should not be considered an alternative to a healthy diet. However, a short term tonic with B vitamins and iron may be an option for those kids who won't eat enough fruit and veg. In Whelehans, we sometimes recommend our Children's Tonic on a short term basis as it is natural and it contains all the B vitamins and mild iron which may be lacking in kids not fond of fruit and veg. Supplements should not be used long term.

*This article is for general information only. It is not meant as a substitute for individual and targeted advice or assessment from a dietician or your medical professional.

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