What’s a picky eater? Why does the challenging behavior develop? What can be done?

Rather than engaging in a power struggle over food, consider the need for young children to learn how to judge what and how much they eat—in spite of the frustration it causes adults. Most of the time when adults try to overrule children’s natural eating cues, the eating habits become worse, not better. When we force, cajole, entice, bribe, or trick children into eating, we’ve set the stage for a long-term battle, one we’re likely to lose. The refusal of food becomes more intense and the issue becomes a contest of wills, not nutrition.

Children can regulate food intake

Babies know how much they need to eat and are able to take the lead with feeding routines. Newborns have two reflexes that make feeding possible: rooting and sucking. Rooting describes the movement of a baby’s head, with open mouth, toward a nipple if it lightly touches one of their cheeks. Sucking describes the ability to use suction to hold a nipple in the mouth and swallow reflexively. These reflexes gradually disappear over the first four months and are replaced by deliberate, voluntary control over swallowing, sucking, and tongue movement.

There is no evidence that solid food offers any nutritional benefit for babies younger than 4 months. Newborns cannot chew, nor can they manipulate the tongue to push food toward the throat, so the early introduction of solid foods makes choking more likely. Additionally, the newborn’s kidneys are too immature to handle the wastes of solid foods, making digestive issues more likely than in babies on a simple breast milk or formula diet.

From even this early stage, babies give signals when they have had enough food. They signal that they feel full and communicate their desire to stop eating. Watch for these cues:

- drawing the head away from the nipple
- falling asleep
- biting the nipple
- not sucking
- spitting out the nipple
- changing posture
- releasing the nipple and turning the head
- smiling and babbling
- clamping the lips shut
- increasing attention to the surroundings

Toddlers are typically cautious about trying new foods and are always eager to assert their independence and autonomy—even when taking the opportunity to refuse a favorite food. Introduce new foods gradually, but allow the toddlers to approach the new food in their own way and on their own schedule. Make mealtimes more pleasant by not putting pres-
Parents and caregivers can help children learn about healthy eating habits by observing their children's preferences and respond appropriately. Here are some tips on how to encourage children to eat healthy foods:

1. **Start Early**: Introduce healthy foods to children from a young age. This will help them develop positive eating habits that last a lifetime.

2. **Be a Role Model**: Children often mimic their caregivers' eating behaviors. Making healthy choices will influence their eating habits.

3. **Involve Children in the Process**: Include children in meal planning and preparation. This can make them more interested in eating what they have helped prepare.

4. **Offer a Variety of Foods**: Provide a variety of foods to ensure that children get the nutrients they need. Avoid making food categories that are good or bad.

5. **Set a Routine**: Establish a regular eating schedule to help children develop healthy eating patterns.

6. **Be Positive**: Encourage children to try new foods with a positive attitude. Avoid using food as a reward or punishment.

7. **Limit Screen Time**: Reduce screen time during meal times to encourage children to focus on eating and conversation.

8. **Be Patient**: Children may not like new foods at first. Be patient and offer foods multiple times to encourage acceptance.

9. **Serve Smaller Portions**: Serve smaller portions of healthy foods to help children feel satisfied without feeling overwhelmed.

10. **Be Creative**: Use creative food presentation to make healthy foods more appealing to children.

By following these tips, parents and caregivers can help children develop healthy eating habits that will benefit them throughout their lives.
“No milk!” Calcium and vitamin D in milk are essential to good nutrition. But a glass of milk isn’t everyone’s favorite. Instead you can try the following:

- Add other milk products like cheese and yogurt to the menu.
- Use milk in place of water in soups and cooked grains.
- Add powdered milk to dishes.
- Prepare other calcium-rich foods including legumes and greens.

“Yuck. I hate mushy vegetables.” The texture of specific foods can dictate their appeal. Some people like raw asparagus; others demand stalks that are limp and droopy. Children often prefer lightly cooked, crisp vegetables rather than overcooked, unrecognizable, mushy ones. Respect children’s preferences by varying vegetable preparation. Serve steamed beans one day and stewed beans another.

A word of caution: Young children can choke on small chunky foods like grapes, cherry tomatoes, and raw, hard foods like carrots, cauliflower, and broccoli. Make sure these are cut into small pieces and are easy to swallow.

“I don’t want spaghetti. I want potatoes.” You aren’t a short-order cook. Preparing special foods delays a child’s willingness to try what’s offered. Toddlers, for example, typically take a long time to try new foods but continuing to substitute old favorites for something new narrows opportunities for exploration and discovery.

With food, as with other areas of early care and education, you can help alleviate or quiet battles by using the following tools of positive guidance:

- **Use redirection.** Help children overcome food aversions by letting them help do the preparation. Being involved in the preparing a meal often makes the food more attractive. Try, for instance, making vegetable soup with the vegetable haters. Ask parents to send one vegetable (potato, carrot, onion, turnip, or a can of corn, for example) and organize the group to cut, cook, and enjoy.

### MAKE SURE THE CHOICES YOU OFFER ARE NUTRITIOUS ONES.

- **Offer choices.** Choices give children control and build their sense of independence but remember, you are in control. Make sure the choices you offer are nutritious ones. Offer both zucchini and cucumber sticks for snack and let the children choose their preference—with or without yogurt dip.
- **Anticipate.** Daily events in the classroom and in the world impact our food needs and interests. Sometimes it’s clear that the best food is a simple grilled cheese sandwich or a banana with peanut butter. Each of us can identify a comfort food, the food we seek when we feel overwhelmed by stress and daily demands. Afford children the same comfort when you know it’s been a particularly bad day.
- **Model the behavior you’d like to see.** Eating with children gives them an opportunity to watch a respected adult make choices and discover preferences. When lunch includes an eggplant casserole, it’s OK to let children know that you haven’t liked eggplant in the past but are willing to try it again. Never pass up an opportunity to discuss food, food production, and nutrition with the children in your care.

### The bottom line

Having a picky eater in your care can be frustrating and worrisome. It helps to know that children’s bodies tell them how much to eat when we give them time and opportunity to discover the sensations of
hunger and satiety (fullness). Adults need to be sensitive to children’s messages about eating and respond appropriately by providing a variety of nutritious meals and snacks.

Help children discover the lifelong skill of responding to hunger with a nutritious meal and leaving the meal with that hunger is satisfied.

References
