

Tips for families with picky eaters



It is natural for children to be picky eaters, but this can understandably be a cause of concern and frustration for the child's custodians. **The willingness to try new foods varies depending on age**, and not all children are equally adventurous when it comes to tasting and exploring new flavours.

A child can be completely healthy and well even if they only eat small amounts of food. If your child is growing normally and has the energy to play and run around, there is usually no cause for concern. However, if there is a significant change in the child's growth or energy level, you should discuss the matter at the maternity and child health clinic or with the school nurse.



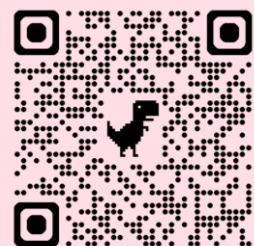
Here are some tips to get you started:

- **Eat together at the dinner table as often as possible.** A child enjoys spending time with their custodians, which will make eating feel like a pleasant and highly anticipated moment. In addition, children learn by watching others at the dinner table. For example, when you eat cauliflower, it is more likely to end up in the child's mouth as well.
- **Talk about food in a positive manner.** Give your child encouraging feedback when their tasting and eating have progressed even in the general direction you would like to see. Even if the child has left some food uneaten, say something encouraging such as: "You did a great job sitting nicely at the table today, thank you for that!" If the child knows that their behaviour will result in negative feedback, they may continue to leave their food untouched in future. Not eating is a source of frustration for the adult, but restrain yourself from showing your concern and frustration.

- **Serve the same food to the whole family.** A child is more likely to eat their food if adults are eating the same food; special diets must naturally be taken into account. You can cook a milder version of a dish for the child if the adults prefer strong spices.
- **Stick to regular mealtimes** even if the child does not eat during every meal. This will help the child remember the mealtimes. Do not offer any food to the child in between meals or allow them to get any on their own, as snacking reduces their appetite and has a negative impact on oral health. You can tell the child: “It’s not time for a meal right now. We’ll eat in an hour.” Food should be consumed approximately every 2 to 4 hours, or about 5 times per day.
- **Water is a good thirst-quenching drink that is kind to your teeth.** If a child is offered milk, juice or soda in between meals, their appetite at mealtime may be reduced because their body has already received energy from the beverage.
- **Let your child take as much food as they want, according to their abilities.** Preschoolers can already do this with ease. If you serve the food yourself, start by putting a small amount of food on the child’s plate. An overly large serving chosen by the adult may immediately dampen the enthusiasm of a picky eater. You can always add more food. A good practice is that the adult decides what to eat or buy, and the child decides how much they want to eat.
- **Serve vegetables and, as necessary, other food items clearly separated.** A mixed salad may be left completely uneaten if it contains one ingredient that the child does not like.
- **Encourage the child to try everything, but don’t force them.** Praise the child when they succeed and also for their effort. Forcing someone to eat, blaming them, threatening them or comparing them with others would surely kill even an adult’s appetite. You can tell the child what you would like them to do: *“I hope that you’ll be brave and try everything”, “I hope you’ll eat enough to keep you going until the next meal.”* Still, leave the amount to eat up to the child’s own discretion and thank them for trying the food. Don’t make them feel guilty about eating bread and leaving the main course on their plate, for example.
- **Food is not a reward, and a child does not have to earn their food.** If you tell the child: *“You can have ice cream once you’ve finished your meal”,* you are increasing the appeal of ice cream at the expense of other foods items. *“Eat your food so you’ll grow big and strong”* is usually an inaccurate statement.

- **Eliminate all distractions during mealtimes.** It is a good idea to let the child know that it is almost time to eat so that they will have a moment to finish playing in peace. Tell the child that they can resume playing after they have finished eating. Playing beeping games, scrolling your phone or continuing unfinished games at the dinner table is not a good idea. Set an example as the adult and make mealtimes calm: do not use any smart devices while eating. You can agree on a place where you will store all smart devices during meals.
- **Introduce new flavors and ingredients alongside old favorites.** Add grated carrot to bread rolls, choose quark instead of yogurt as one of the ingredients in the child's favorite smoothie or add a new flavour to their familiar fruit mix. Be honest about what is in the food or on the plate if the child asks, and encourage them to try it.
- **Patience is the key.** It takes an average of 10 to 15 times to get used to a new food item.
- **Involve the child in cooking, shopping and even berry picking.** Allow them to help you cook if they want to. Even small children can wash potatoes, while older children can prepare the salad. A picky eater may be tempted to snack on vegetables they have chopped themselves. Tasting happens on its own when eating is not accompanied by any compulsion.
- **Adopt a flexible attitude towards food.** There is no need to divide food items into permitted and prohibited ones. In terms of food, a total ban is not a good idea for children or adults. For example, completely forbidding sweet treats may increase a child's interest in them. However, a flexible attitude does not mean that the child can eat whatever they want whenever they want. Furthermore, children should not be exposed to any adult talk about diets or any negative comments about your body or other people's bodies.

Read more in the Heart Association's Neuvokas Perhe Eating section: neuvokasperhe.fi/en/eating



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What works well for our family, where do we have some room for improvement?

		This is what works for us	This is something we should work on	This is not relevant to us at the moment
1.	We have regular mealtimes, i.e. we eat 4 to 6 meals per day every 3 to 4 hours.			
2.	We eat together at the dinner table as often as possible.			
3.	Our mealtimes are peaceful and free from distractions such as smart devices.			
4.	We all eat the same food at mealtimes.			
5.	The child is allowed to serve themselves according to their abilities.			
6.	The atmosphere during our family meals is positive.			
7.	We eat something from every food group:			
	Dairy			
	Cereals			
	Vegetables			
	Fruits and berries			
	Meat			
	Fish			
	Plant protein products			
	Fats			
	Legumes			
	Potato, pasta, rice			
8.	We remember to include some vegetables, berries or fruits in every meal.			
9.	We drink water to quench our thirst.			
10.	We encourage our child to try new foods, but we don't force them to eat them.			
11.	If the child does not like something they are tasting for the first time, we will try again 10–15 times.			
12.	We don't forget to give positive feedback when the child tries a new food item.			
13.	We involve the child in cooking and other food-related activities.			
14.	Our attitude towards food is flexible, and we do not divide food items into permitted and prohibited ones.			
15.	We do not use food as a reward under any circumstances.			