



## How to Cope with a Picky Eater

Read my quotes from an interview I did on picky eating in kids and what to do about it for Walmart Live Better Magazine by Seema Persaud

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

The first time Andrea Holwegner's son had broccoli, he gagged and spit it out. "With his eyes wide open he looked at me as if to say, 'What was that, mom?'" says the Calgary mom. As a registered dietician, Holwegner hears from parents of picky eaters on a daily basis. After following her own tips, her son now loves broccoli. Holwegner, of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting, and registered dietician Jennifer House, of First Step Nutrition in Calgary, share why and when kids develop poor eating habits, and how you can overcome them:

Younger kids can become picky eaters once solids are introduced to their diet given the new smells and textures, finds Holwegner. Moving from a milk-based diet to infant cereals to minced food can cause toddlers to resist eating. It doesn't stop there.

"When kids hit the terrible twos, kids want to show more independence," says Holwegner, which is one of the reasons your child may refuse to eat particular foods. Then, as kids age and enter school, they can be distracted over lunch hour and recess, and a simple lack of encouragement to eat right while at school might prevent your child from eating what you carefully packed in his or her lunch box.

### 11 ways to overcome picky eating:

#### 1. Give kids a way out

Holwegner recommends giving kids the option to spit out food if they don't like it. Consider a "no-thank-you" bowl, as Holwegner calls it, to keep manners in check. Simply tell your child that she can try it and if she doesn't like it, can spit it out. This helps some kids feel comfortable enough to taste new foods.

#### 2. Prepare the same food different ways

Just because your child doesn't like raw carrots, doesn't mean she won't like it in a soup. To get her son to eat broccoli, Holwegner gave it to him with various dips like hummus and creamy dill sauce.



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### **3. Repeatedly expose kids to the same item**

For some kids it takes 15 times before they'll eat something, says House. "I think parents give up quite quickly," she says. Some parents stop serving a particular food to their child after three to four refusals, but Holwegner and House both agree – repetition is best.

### **4. Stick to small portions**

Don't crown your child's plate with something she doesn't like – bigger portions can be overwhelming.

### **5. Be clear of your responsibilities**

House subscribes to eating specialist Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding, which recommends that parents choose *what* kids eat, while letting kids choose how much. Parents tend to have a hard time with this area, but both House and Wegner find this tactic successful over time. If your kid wants seconds or can't finish a large bowl of pasta, let her decide that. "We want our kids to grow up listening to their appetite," says House. "Things backfire when kids feel like they're backed into a corner to eat," adds Holwegner.

### **6. Don't cater to dislikes**

If you always make your kid exactly what she wants to eat after refusing to stomach what you've made for dinner, she'll learn to expect that in the future and won't have an incentive to try new things. "If it's not eaten after 15 to 20 minutes of sitting there, take it away," advises Holwegner. Hold off on giving your kid food until the next designated meal or snack time to separate the experience. "There's going to be a meal or snack within a few hours, so they won't starve," she adds. Mixing the not-so-favourite food item with items your child is familiar with will help if the next mealtime is far away.

### **7. Give them choice**

Kids appreciate having a say in what they eat, so let them. Give your child specific options for what she can snack on to get her to eat. "You can ask, 'What type of fruit would you like: grapes, strawberries, blueberries or some of each?'" recommends Holwegner.

### **8. Get kids involved in meal planning and prep**

For snacks and meals, take your kid to the store to help buy groceries and get older kids to help you wash, cut and cook food. Plus, take advantage of warm weather and get kids involved in planting fruits and veggies. "Let them explore the visual and tactile experience of food," says Holwegner. Her three-year-old son cuts up smoothie ingredients with a dull knife under her supervision.



## 9. Be an effective role model

If you don't eat the food your child refuses to eat, you're going to have a hard time getting her to eat it, too. "If you only eat asparagus once a year at a neighbour's house, you can't expect your kids to want to eat it," says Holwegner.

## 10. Talk to older kids

Ask tweens and teens how they feel after eating food that isn't good for them, recommends House. For athletic kids, talk to them about how healthy eating and getting the right nutrients can help with their success and energy, she adds.

## 11. Schedule regular eating times

Having routine snack and meal times help kids feel hungry at designated hours, so they'll be more inclined to eat what you put on the table. Limiting access to snacks outside of those hours can help. And, for younger kids, picky eating may have to do with your child being full of fluids like milk, so pay attention to whether that's the case.

If you've tried these steps and still have no luck getting your child to eat broccoli or another food in question, then you may have to accept that.

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*Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit [www.healthstandnutrition.com](http://www.healthstandnutrition.com). Twitter @chocoholicRD.*