

# Do you struggle with a picky eater?

It can be really stressful for the parents and caregivers and make it hard to implement a lot of the dietary changes that are often recommended at the dental office. Picky eating (aka food neophobia or fussiness) is really common and can seemingly ruin a whole meal when refusal and battles take over. The good news is that recent research gives us practical, NO-GUILT strategies that actually work. Below are some practical strategies to try implementing at home.

## 1) Repeated exposures.

What this actually means: Offer a super small, familiar portion (one pea, a sliver of roasted pepper) regularly, at least 8- 15 times. These brief, low-pressure exposures over days and weeks is typical for changes in liking.

Don't force. Let your child inspect, lick, or touch it. If your child wants it nowhere near them, that's OK too. Acceptance will often grow gradually. If it doesn't, shelf the food, but not forever. Give it a break, but try again

## 2) Keep mealtimes neutral and predictable, and as a family (as often as possible)

Once your child turns 1, offer 3 meals + 1-2 snacks at regular times. Establishing regular meal and snack routines gives kids the structure they need to tune into their natural hunger and fullness cues.

## 3) If you have a little more time, and your child is on the younger side, try sensory play!

How to do this: Use short activities where your child looks at, smells, squeezes, stamps or paints with food. These types of activities are great for younger kids.

- Beets for stamping on a white paper towel on a paper plate
- Build a food rainbow: Sort foods by color (such as red strawberries, orange peppers, yellow cheese cubes, and green cucumber slices). Talking about colors and textures helps.
- Food "art" can include making faces and shapes with different dried pasta shapes, cubes of cheese, cherry tomatoes, etc.
- Fill a bin with items like dried foods like lentils, beans or pasta and hide toys (or pretend food) inside for them to find.
- Water play with fruits or veggies: Add sliced citrus, cucumber, or berries to water for scooping, squeezing, and stirring.
- Explore different textures: Touch cooked versus raw versions of the same foods. For example, show steamed carrots, raw carrots and roasted carrots.

These tips won't work overnight. It does take some persistence, but constant food exposure is important in order to add more variety to your child's diet. If you have any questions, please let us know!

*These tips are helpful for the majority of kids who parents would call "picky." However, if you feel like your child has more persistent food refusal (oftentimes based on sensory properties and or underlying conditions), they may need additional support from a specialist and be sure to speak with your pediatrician.*