



# Luzerne County Head Start, Inc.

## NHSA Family Connections

March 2012

### Picky Eater?

At some point in the first five years, almost every child will refuse to eat something we offer. Adults often say, “You’re such a “picky eater!”

Whether you consider your child fussy, hard to please, or just plain finicky you should know that you are not alone. Rest assured that picky eating is a temporary phase.



#### A “picky eater” is a child who:

- Refuses to eat some foods or food groups such as vegetables and meats.
- Grumbles or complains about what is served.
- Moves food around the plate instead of eating.
- Feeds a pet or hides food to make their plate look empty.
- Shows normal growth at all doctor visits.

#### What is “Normal?”

What makes children so choosy? It turns out this may just be part of normal development! Your baby may prefer a familiar formula or foods over others. Babies may also spit out lumpy food or one with a new flavor. But in general most will eat a range of different foods until around age 2.

As toddlers become “skilled walkers,” experts believe that their taste buds “turn off.” They may refuse to eat something they ate happily just yesterday. Confused parents throw their hands up in frustration!

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Many children are more choosy eaters between the ages of 24 months and 4 years of age. It is normal for young children to refuse to eat a few foods and some may even dislike whole food groups. Yes, this means that they are pickier—but they are also less likely to try to eat dangerous things they find! So maybe this is a good thing in disguise.

Naturally parents want children to eat what they are given for many reasons. We want our children to eat the food we choose so they will be healthy. We do not want our children to waste food and money. We want our children to do as we tell them.

### Normal toddlers and preschoolers will:

- Happily eat a food or meal one day –then snub the same thing the next day.
- Eat a very small amount from one meal or day, and then eat a lot the next.
- Taste something but spit it out.
- Refuse to taste a food even when you offer it several different times.
- Only eat a very select set of foods.

### Simple Facts

- *Picky eating will reach a peak during the toddler or preschool years.*
- *We can't force a child to eat if he or she refuses. Doing so will only lead to bad feelings and a battle over meals. A mistake we parents often make is to try to force a child to eat what we want them to eat.*
- *A toddler's tummy is the size of his or her fist. That means a child's portion of anything should be much smaller than that of an adult. Ask your child's doctor if you aren't sure how much food your child needs.*
- *A child may eat very little or seem to eat nothing at all. Experts say that he or she will make up the nutrition later that day or later in the week. If your child is growing normally, your doctor will probably tell you he or she is eating enough.*
- *Accept that your child will decide what to eat and whether or not to eat what you prepare. Your doctor will tell you a child will not starve his or herself.*



## Ten Tips for Parents of Picky Eaters

1. **Use patience and make family mealtime pleasant.**
  - Relax, focus the conversation around family member's days, and enjoy each other's company.
2. **Resist the temptation to pressure or punish your child at mealtime.**
  - Let your child choose how much to eat. Never make the dinner table a battle ground. Forcing your child to be a member of the "clean plate club" will likely backfire. Don't focus closely on what food is eaten or how much is eaten.



3. **Make it easy for your child to taste new foods.**
  - Don't force a child to taste or eat a new food—but be sure to eat it yourself. Calmly offer it again and again. Nutrition experts tell us that a child might not try a new food until it has been offered repeatedly – even up to 20 times. There's no rush.
4. **Don't use dessert or other foods as a "bribe."**
  - Just make *all* desserts healthy and nutritious foods. Serve cut up fruit or yogurt with fruit.
5. **Respect any strong food dislikes—but don't become a short order cook.**
  - If the main meal is the one he or she "hates" but the rest of the family enjoys, then *occasionally* allow your child to make his or her own healthy substitute. Make it cold non-sugary cereal with milk, yogurt, or a simple sandwich he or she can make.



**Did you know that healthy food is affordable?**



A bag of potato chips costs about the...



... same as a bag of apples!

#### 6. Cook together.

- Involve your child when you make meals and offer choices of vegetables. Placing food on the plate in playful ways also makes it more appealing. Experts say that children are more likely to eat a meal they helped prepare.

#### 7. Vegetables?

- Some taste bitter to children. Try adding low fat dip or putting mashed vegetables into spaghetti sauce. But don't worry if your child doesn't eat them today. Later he or she will try them if you eat them.

#### 8. Shop together!

- Look for colorful foods that are not in boxes. Teach your child that boxed and packaged food is less healthy. Buy cheap star stickers and give your child one to put on all the healthy choices you bring home from the store.

#### 9. Only have healthy snacks in the house.

- This way food is never an issue even if your child is hungry because he or she wouldn't eat a meal. Keep the healthy stuff where your child can choose it. As a rule, avoid buying high calorie foods such as fried snacks and chips, soda of any kind, sugary juice or cereals, and foods that are "treats" such as cookies.

#### 10. Trust your child's appetite.

- Your child will eat what he or she needs. If you are worried, check in with your child's doctor to keep an eye on the child's health and ask about a vitamin supplement. Then just keep offering variety and use even more patience.