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Picky Eaters

The most frequent complaints heard from parents during their children's well exams are ones that pertain to their picky eating habits. Most infants start off fairly cooperative and enthusiastic about feeding (unless they have conditions like severe reflux or specific food allergies).

It is only when an infant nears their first birthday that they develop some of their recalcitrant feeding habits. A formerly complacent, indiscriminating, food loving baby suddenly starts to throw his food forcefully off the tall high chair and typically splatters the kitchen walls with his own "art work". Almost every household has known such moments, even with the most innocent, angelic kids. If you ask your local child psychologist, I am sure that you may receive a logical, psychological explanation for this behavior. However, I quickly glanced over the major developmental theories of Piaget, Freud, and Erikson and have *not* seen any mention of a transitional stage that occurs around the first year of life that may explain this "picky eating" phenomenon.

Parents are often faced with a dilemma: how do I approach my picky child? Should I insist on feeding her table foods in spite of her resistance? Or, should I succumb to her desire to stick to a few, extremely selective foods?

Researching this topic I came across a developmental psychologist by the name of Jean Mercer. In one of her articles in *Psychology Today*, she elaborates on the reasons behind "picky eaters". Here is what she suggests:

1. **Metabolic Need:** Infants grow very rapidly in the first year of life. However, the natural rate of growth slows down considerably. Typically, when an infant reaches their first birthday, they weigh 3 times their birth weight. In comparison, most children gain between 5-7 pounds in the second year of life. The "pickiness" therefore, could be attributed to a slower rate of growth.
2. **Threshold of responsiveness:** basically, different children have different thresholds when noticing small differences between things or events. Children with a low threshold, are repelled from eating foods that are not cooked as they are used to them (be it in taste or temperature). This may explain why some children only like their milk cold out of the fridge, and some like it warmer, mixed with some boiling water. These children tend to be picky in general and may also exhibit signs of Obsessive Compulsive behaviors (for example, they may be concerned if their beds made too loosely or too tightly, or if their shirts are tucked in or out).
3. **Experiences:** babies are often exposed to foods through their mother's milk and may subsequently find these foods more "familiar" and acceptable. Therefore, nursing babies may



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recognize table foods as familiar foods. When parents introduce too many *new* foods in a short period of time, a child may cling to one food that he or she likes and reject numerous other foods.

So what approach should parents take?

Almost all experts agree on one thing: Do not force feed, bribe or coax your child to eat!!! Doing this will cause an aversion to the food that may be hard and take long years to correct. Instead, as Dr. Mercer suggests, parents have to work to make those foods more familiar. Here are some steps that may make your life a little easier.

1. Young children are rarely convinced to eat something “because Daddy likes it”, but they may become more interested if they see their own sibling chewing his drum stick enthusiastically.
2. Involve your child in food preparation: while your toddler maybe too young to cut tomatoes for the salad, he or she could help make some useful decisions. Ask them if they would prefer carrots or green beans as a side dish.
3. Be patient and give frequent praises for any attempts to try a new food. Studies show that it can take 10 or more exposure to get your child to even *sample* a new food.
4. Don't Force but Don't Replace either – I will expand on this in detail in the next issue, g-d willing. Parents often replace meals with a bottle of milk or yogurt. This is one of the worst ways to feed a child. Children should clearly understand that what a parent prepares for dinner is the *only* food that will be served for dinner. Don't make them a separate meal or a late meal after dinner is served. Dining together will help expose children to your healthy food choices and will encourage them to do the same.

Lastly, I want all the parents reading this article to remember. When your child rejects a food, he or she is NOT rejecting the person who prepared it!!!

Wishing you happy and satiating dinner times,

Sincerely,

David Elazar Simai M.D.