

## Picky Eaters

One of the greatest challenges a nanny will face is the picky eater. Charged with the complete care of the child/children, it is part of the nanny's job to ensure that healthy eating habits are established or continued. However, children often have a long list of foods that they refuse to touch, making meal-time extremely frustrating. As with other issues in the nanny profession, it is important to have good communication with the parents: nannies need to be aware of parents' expectations with regard to food and parents need to be aware of any obstacles the nanny faces at meal-time. A solution must be designed together.

When picky eaters are very young, one is torn between making them eat the right foods and just getting any food into them at all. Will it be four chicken nuggets drowned in ketchup or one piece of baked chicken accompanied by lots of crying? As the nanny, you want to be sure you are compliant with the parents' wishes, but you also want a little less stress in your workday. Cooperative meal-time planning will have to include some daily compromises, which enable the child to get adequate nutrition and the parents and caregivers to have some peace at the table. While these compromises are useful, consideration will have to be given to the subject of authority. It must be clear to the child that not everything is up for negotiation: parents and nanny are still in charge – they make the rules and decide upon consequences.

There are significant developmental differences between toddlers and older children and, therefore, distinct strategies should be developed for successful eating habits. Toddlers are active little people whose moods and energy levels are tied directly to hunger. Balanced eating throughout the day, with limited sugar intake, will help to maintain an even keel. Spacing snacks well before scheduled meals will ensure that the child is hungry, but not *too* hungry, before lunch and dinner, and more likely to eat well.

Toddlers are also finicky – one day they may want mostly fruits, another day, mostly breads and crackers, another, lots of cheese and milk, etc. Favorite foods may change on a daily basis. Doctors recommend that parents and caregivers go with these cravings (within reason), as long as the foods provided are healthy. “Since erratic eating habits are as normal as toddler mood swings, expect your child to eat well one day and eat practically nothing the next. Toddlers from one to three years need between 1,000 and 1,300 calories a day, yet they may not eat this amount every day. Aim for a nutritionally-balanced week, not a balanced day.” (“Feeding Toddlers: 17 Tips for Pleasing the Picky Eater,” [www.AskDrSears.com](http://www.AskDrSears.com).)

Older toddlers, from 4-5-years-old, will generally be more reasonable when it comes to eating. They will still have preferences but should not be as emotional about eating (i.e., using food as a power play or instrument of defiance). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends making healthy substitutions for undesired foods (within reason), asking children to eat smaller portions of foods they do not enjoy, and encouraging them to try new things. (*Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5*, 1998).

Interestingly, the seating position of the child can have an impact on how they do at the table: dangling legs, ill-fitting chairs, and inappropriate table heights can all make for squirming toddlers. Other environmental factors can also have an impact:

- Watching television during meal-time is a certain distraction and will take the child's focus away from food.
- Meal-time should be as stress-free as possible – try to keep the mood pleasant and avoid rushing.
- Too much pressure on the child to finish everything on his plate will lead to increased defiance on his part.
- Participating in the preparation of the meal – helping to make or choose the food, or setting the table – will make the child feel important and involved, and she will be more likely to eat.
- Caregivers should model good eating habits. Children learn and adopt the majority of their behaviors from parents and caregivers.

Older children will have fewer issues when it comes to picky eating; at least, their issues will be less volatile. They can also better understand the relationship between healthy eating and a healthy mind and body. Provide them with resources to learn on their own: books on nutrition, growth, and development; visit the pediatrician; or make an appointment with a nutritionist for a greater depth of understanding. Older children will respond better to being given the responsibility to make healthy choices on their own. The goal of eating should not be to get the dessert – children are smart enough to understand that their bodies need good nutrition to grow, get stronger and smarter.

It is important to note that serious problems with eating can be indicative of a larger issue, such as Sensory Processing Disorder (formerly known as “Sensory Integration Dysfunction”) or Oral Hypersensitivity. For more information on Sensory Processing Disorder, go to [www.spdfoundation.net](http://www.spdfoundation.net). The Costello Syndrome Support Group is a good place to start for information on oral hypersensitivity: [www.costellokids.com](http://www.costellokids.com). If children have a resistance to anything being put on or in their mouths, or have a hyperactive gag reflex, they may have a medical problem.

For very specific information about nutrition, healthy foods that appeal to young children, and creative strategies to get them to eat, the following are wonderful resources:

- [www.askdrsears.com](http://www.askdrsears.com) – The article mentioned above as well as “The ABC’s of Teaching Nutrition to Your Kids” are found at this site, and the Dr. Sears group has many wonderful books, including, *The Baby Book*.
- [www.aap.com](http://www.aap.com) – The American Academy of Pediatrics website and many guide books, including the *Caring for Your Baby...* series.
- *What to Expect: The Toddler Years*, Workman Publishing, NY.
- *Super Baby Food*, by Ruth Yaron, FJ Roberts Publishing Co.

Happy New Year and happy eating!

All the best to you and your family,  
The NannyPro Team