



# Mealtime Mentoring

September 2008

## Children with Food Preferences

### What should you do?

... *Joey gets upset when one food touches another on his plate.*

... *Sammy has a food jag. This week will only eat peanut butter sandwiches; last week only wanted macaroni.*

... *Billy won't eat his broccoli.*

What seems "picky" may just be a child's first attempt at making decisions ... a step towards growing up and showing independence. Food is one of the few things a child has some control over and although it seems like a challenge to you, it is a step towards making their own food choices.

### Be reassured that:

... It is normal to have food preferences.  
... It is common for new foods to be rejected by toddlers and young children. The more times children are exposed to a new food, the more likely they are to accept them. If a food is rejected, continue to offer it again and again at other times.

... A food jag or "picky eating" may just be a change in appetite. Most children will gain an appetite again when their growth and development needs more food for energy. Children develop at different rates. Generally, toddlers have

more development and growth than preschoolers.

... When children are hungry they will eat. Trust the child's appetite. Don't force the child to eat everything on the plate as that may encourage overeating.

... Pressuring a child to eat a particular food may increase dislike for the food. As well, restricting a food may promote overconsumption and a preference for that food.

... Food preferences may last several weeks or months. Even though a child may have a particular food jag, over several days, their total energy intake is usually constant.

### A child's "no" today doesn't mean "no" forever!

#### How can you handle the food preferences?

Treat a food jag casually since it may not last long anyway. Relax and be patient. Learn how to avoid conflict with the child and handle their eating preferences. This way, the child won't be able to use food as a way to control you.

Look at what the child eats over the day or several days not at each meal. The child may be eating more variety than you think.



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Set reasonable time limits on the start and end of meals and snacks. Remove the food at the end of the meal or snack.

Choose NOT to be a short order cook. Offer the same food to all the children in your care. Plan at least one food each child likes.

Provide two or three choices, not a whole selection of food. Let the child decide.



***Enjoy new foods together.***

Let children eat their favourite food as long as it is nutritious.

Serve food plain. Respect the "no food touching" rule if it is important to the child.

Try new foods together. Offer new foods first before serving familiar foods.

Handle the food jag without criticism or calling the child a "picky eater". They may believe what you call them.

### **Practical Tips**

- Serve appropriate serving sizes for individual children.
- Make food appealing – select foods with a variety of flavours, colours, shapes, textures, temperatures.
- Provide appropriate space to eat with little distraction.
- Involve the children in the meal preparation where it is appropriate and possible.
- Show parents the weekly menu so they can plan accordingly and support you.
- When introducing new foods, have familiar ones available as well.
- Allow choice between several healthy food items.
- To avoid catering to unreasonable or unhealthy demands, serve at least one food each child likes at each sitting.
- Model healthy eating by eating with the children. This also helps to confirm a positive meal environment.
- Allow children the freedom to refuse to eat certain foods. Ensure appropriate substitutions are available. You may need to expose children to unfamiliar food several times before they will accept it. If it is refused once, offer it again at a future date.
- Children may accept a new food more easily when they are in a group rather than by themselves.
- Serve foods that reflect the culture and religious background of your children.
- Provide guidance for parents with suggestions for what foods can be sent with their children.

*Helping you provide healthy food and a positive eating environment in early learning and child care settings.*