VALLEYHEALTH

Your Guide to Dealing With Picky Eaters

Getting children to eat a balanced diet can be challenging, especially when they are picky eaters. The good news is that there are ways to encourage your child to try new foods and develop healthy eating habits.

Tips for Encouraging Your Picky Eater

Here are some ways to help your child be more open to trying new foods:

- **Be a Role Model:** Children learn by watching. If they see you eating a variety of foods, they are more likely to try them.

- **Give Them Choices:** Let your child choose between two healthy options. For example, “Would you like broccoli or green beans with dinner?” Giving choices makes them feel involved and empowered.

- **Involve Them in Meal Prep:** Take your child grocery shopping and let them pick out a new fruit or vegetable. Have them help wash, stir, or set the table. Cooking together can make trying new foods more exciting.

- **Make Food Fun:** Present food in creative ways, such as cutting fruits and vegetables into fun shapes or arranging foods into colorful patterns on the plate.

- **Offer Small Portions:** Large servings can be overwhelming. Start with just one or two bites of a new food. Over time, they may feel more comfortable eating larger amounts.

- **Prepare Foods in Different Ways:** If your child dislikes raw carrots, try steaming or roasting them. Mixing vegetables into a favorite dish, such as pasta or scrambled eggs, can also help.

- **Be Patient:** It can take multiple exposures before a child accepts a new food. Keep offering it in different ways without pressure.

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- **Encourage Family Meals:** Eating together as a family in a relaxed setting encourages children to try what's on the table and develop healthy habits.
- **Avoid Pressure or Punishment:** Forcing a child to eat can make them more resistant. Encourage, but don't make mealtime stressful. Avoid using dessert as a reward for eating vegetables, as this can create negative associations with healthy foods.

Signs of a More Serious Eating Concern

While picky eating is common, some behaviors may indicate a bigger issue, such as an eating disorder or a sensory-related condition. Watch for these signs:

- **Lack of weight gain or weight loss**
- **Low energy levels or trouble focusing**
- **Extremely limited food choices**
- **Avoidance of entire food groups**
- **Distress or anxiety around meals**
- **Gagging or vomiting when trying new foods**

If you notice these concerns, speak with your child's primary care provider. Early intervention can help address underlying issues and ensure proper nutrition for growth and development.

Helping a picky eater expand their diet takes time, patience, and creativity. Encourage your child to explore new foods in a positive, stress-free way. Keep mealtimes enjoyable and avoid making food a battle. Remember that small steps can lead to big changes over time. For more information or to schedule an appointment, contact Valley Health today!