

FAMILY

A Chef's Best Tips for Raising Non-Picky Eaters

Letting them help in the kitchen may be the key.

By Julie Burleson April 16, 2018



It's never too late to transform a fussy eater into a veggie lover.

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One of my biggest pet peeves is the existence of restaurant kid's menus. Why limit children to a basic menu of mac and cheese, chicken fingers and burgers? Kids shouldn't automatically be put into a box that shapes them as selective eaters, when they really do not have to be. With more than 225,000 students passing through our doors each year at [Young Chefs Academy](#), the kids' cooking school I founded, we've come to learn that there are many things that can be done to promote an adventurous palate and help raise non-picky eaters.

Children can become fussy eaters for a number of reasons. It can be from a parent's influence, the style that food is served, kids being made fun of for something they brought in their lunch—the list goes on. In addition, there are many accidental things adults do that can cause pickiness. A prime example is parents who label their kids, especially in front of them. When kids are told they are picky eaters, they will believe it's true and use the label as an excuse to not eat something.

Just as important, parents shouldn't make a big deal when kids do eat a certain food. If they choose to eat broccoli, don't applaud them—they should be eating broccoli! I'd veer away from making food associated with a reward process for your children.

If your kids do not like a specific food, suggest they choose how to prepare it the next time. For example, show them how to chop and sauté mushrooms instead of serving them raw. Changing the texture and consistency of a certain food can completely change one's perception of it.

I am not a proponent of making a different meal for a child, based off of their seeming likes and dislikes, aside from what the rest of the family is eating. Encourage kids to experiment with food they may not initially like, but don't force them to taste anything. I'm a big fan of having fun and interacting with children. Their tasting of new food tends to follow naturally.



Getting your kids involved in cooking may inspire them to try new flavors.

Photo: Young Chefs Academy

Pickiness often comes from attention-seeking behaviors. One of the best remedies is to involve kids in the food-making process. Children will become immersed in the creation and steps of making a meal and their perception of certain foods takes a back seat. The focus is taken off the food itself and shifts to the child creating their own meal for themselves. Never in a million years would a parent think that their child would come home after one of our classes and proclaim their new love for lemon grass soup or rhubarb! This stems from utilizing children's sensory experiences. Have them pick out the veggies from the store, wash them, chop them and prepare them. You will be amazed at what they will end up eating—and thoroughly enjoying.

Also, encourage your child to cook with other kids. Children will listen well and get onboard with an idea if it comes from their peers. Sign up for your own kids' cooking class, host a cooking birthday party or have a cooking playdate. Kids can experiment and encourage each other to try something new together.

Lastly, never forget that it is okay to not like certain ingredients. Adults are just the same! Pickiness will fade away naturally. A great way for children to expand their palates is through trying new foods with the family. Choose new ingredients from the grocery store to test at home. Experiment with new and adventurous ways to prepare different ingredients and get involved in the kitchen together. Most importantly, have fun!

Julie Burleson has served as Young Chefs Academy Founder and CEO for 14 years. Julie owned and operated two culinary businesses prior to franchising the Young Chefs Academy model and set out on a mission to teach children the joy and value of cooking. She was the recipient of Best Feasibility Plan from Baylor University's John F. Baugh Center for Entrepreneurship and is a proud member of the IFA (International Franchise Association).