

## **Finicky Eaters**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Ronnie's one rule is, never eat anything green. This also applies to other-colored vegetables in a salad, which by themselves may be okay, but become tainted when they come in contact with salad greens.

The parents of this four-year-old can't understand why he doesn't respond to that wildly popular parental technique for getting balky kids to eat – the threat. "Eat your green vegetables *or they will be no dessert!*"

Children, especially young ones, are often finicky eaters. Food fads are common. So is avoiding certain foods and, at times, eating less than sparrows. Food comes in all kinds of colors, shapes, textures and flavors, not all of which appeal to children. Most adults have marked food preferences, so it's not unreasonable for a child not to like liver either.

The good news is that children who are finicky eaters are not doomed to nutritional deficiency and won't starve themselves.

The bad news is that the common parental response of trying to force children to eat something they consider yucky is usually a losing proposition. However well-intentioned, such tactics invite power struggles, usually don't work, and risk making mealtime stressful and unpleasant for everyone.

What to do? Start by setting a good example. If you wolf down the chips and desserts, snack between meals, and avoid veggies, don't be surprised if your child's idea of dinner is chips and dip.

Serving only nutritious foods is perhaps the best way to steer children toward a healthy diet. Offering several types of nutritious foods increases the odds that children will find something they like. Try serving only the kinds of foods that you wouldn't mind your child making a whole meal of. This might include fruits; vegetables; protein foods, like meat, cheese, beans; milk; and carbohydrates, such as potatoes, noodles, and rice; and grains.

Introduce new foods gradually. Offer a small portion of a new food with more familiar foods and call it an "extra." If it doesn't work the first time, serve it again until it becomes clear your child isn't going to fall for it, then try other new foods. After a couple of months, come back to the first "extra." You might be surprised. Children's food preferences do change.

What if you are someone who loses all resolve in the face of Grandma's brownies? Fall back to a compromise position. Serve dessert occasionally and in small portions.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*