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Picky Eaters – patience pays!

The daily frustrations of trying to convince your child to eat healthy, nutritious foods may be a daunting task, especially when your efforts end up lining the floor and tabletop instead of your child's stomach! Picky eating, mostly found in toddlers, is more common than you may think. Some children are merely trying to express their independence where others only need a little more encouragement, as part of their emotional and physical development. Here are a few practical guidelines that you, as a parent or caregiver, can initiate to put your child on the path to better nutrition:

Routine

Try to keep meal and snack times at the same time every day. With this, make sure that your child is not given any snacks or drinks (besides water) in the hour before the next set meal. If he/she refuses to take any foods at a sitting, don't give in; wait until the next meal and offer something different.

Environment

Allowing your child to eat in any place can result in a lack of discipline and control. It is best to make sure that meal times are an occasion for the whole family, ideally enjoyed at a table. Maintaining a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere and avoiding the presence of any distractions, such as toys or television, may also be helpful.

Preparation

Include your child in all aspects of preparing a meal, starting at the supermarket, as this may spark a greater interest in what those foods may taste like. Allow your child to help choose and prepare the vegetables and other healthy items you buy, making sure that the process is fun and informative for him/her.

If you are trying to introduce a new, specific food item, it is always beneficial to combine that item with another that you know your child already likes (e.g. cauliflower with cheese sauce or pumpkin with cinnamon and a pinch of brown sugar). If you find that your child is repeatedly refusing something, try to hide it in meals, such as chopped carrots/pureed pumpkin with bolognaise or beans mashed with potatoes. Food items can also be ground or pureed to change the texture - serving the food like this may be more acceptable to your child and he/she can get used to the taste of it in this way.

Serving

Food presentation is a very important factor in a child's decision to try or refuse a new food item. Again, allow your child to be involved in the process – cut out

shapes from the foods with a cookie cutter (where possible) or try to form a picture such as a smiley face on the serving plate. Also make use of a variety of foods in attractive colours so that the meal appears palatable. Most children do not like different food items touching each other when served, so try to keep them separate throughout preparation. Serving foods at different temperatures (hot, neutral or cold) and allowing reign (within reason) over which condiments your child would like to use may also be helpful in acceptance.

At the end of the day, it is important to respect and not force your child to do anything. Avoid the use of bribery with other food items like sweets or chocolates (offer a trip to the beach or the park instead) and remember that you should act as a positive role model so that healthy habits are inculcated in your child, which is a determinant for their future food choices. Finally, as you implement these ideas, patience is a virtue – repeated exposure to foods on a number of occasions may be necessary. It is typical for a picky eater to only resume normal eating habits as he/she sees fit but hang in there – your cooking skills will eventually be enjoyed and your efforts will pay off.

Try some of the following fun ideas:

- Fruit smoothie – 1 cup plain vanilla/flavoured yogurt, 1 banana/fruit of your choice, 1 cup milk, ½ cup ice blocks - *Blend until at preferable consistency*
- Banana and cinnamon pancakes
- Soft boiled eggs with whole wheat toast fingers
- Sweet potato oven fries
- Macaroni and cheese with broccoli
- Veggie/fruit/chicken/seafood skewers
- Bite-sized snacks - a tray with various food items can also be offered between meals. Try sliced apple, celery stalks, carrots and broccoli trees with dippers such as peanut butter, cottage cheese or yogurt to make it more interesting. Frozen fruits (grapes and berries) are also a perfect treat!

For more heart smart information, phone the **Heart Mark Diet Line** at 0860 223 222 where you will be consulted by one of the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA's Registered Dietitians or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za for more nutritional advice.

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