

101 Ideas for your Picky Eater

Making meal time easier to swallow

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Introduction

A big misconception that most people have about speech-language pathologists is that they are around to only help people with lisps and stutters. The truth is we work with a lot of different people from babies to senior citizens with speech, language, learning and swallowing deficits. I've had a great opportunity to meet and work with a lot of amazing children and one of the complaints that I hear most from their parents is how they're concerned their child will live their whole life on chicken nuggets, french fries and goldfish crackers. Well, maybe your child isn't in this boat exactly but he's obviously a picky eater if you've decided to pick up this book. This book is intended for parents and maybe therapists and teachers who are looking for some new, exciting and EASY ways to introduce new foods into your child's repertoire. The goal of this book is to make trying new foods a non-threatening and enjoyable experience for both the child and the frantic adult!

To Force or Not to Force

I'm a big believer of not forcing a child to eat. A child will not starve himself. If we force a child to eat it will become a power struggle and nobody wants that. I also think designated meal times are very important to stimulate a child's awareness of his hungry/full signal. A child who is snacking all day will not get the opportunity to ever really feel that hungry feeling. This also goes for drinking. I see a lot of children in my practice that graze on their juice box as if it has replaced a pacifier. This is also a no-no. Sidebar: be careful with spouted cups, it's my duty as a speech-language pathologist to give you parents the low down that we are seeing higher incidences in speech problems from kids that use these non-spill spouted cups. There is no good research yet, either way but just to be safe you might want to use cups with flip up straws instead. Yeah, yeah, I know...more spills but what would you rather, a sofa with apple juice on it or two years of speech therapy bills?

Why Won't He Eat What I Give Him!

There are many reasons why a child may be a picky eater and some of them may have a very medical base. For this reason, trust your instincts and discuss it with your pediatrician before trying any of these ideas since there is always the possibility that something bigger is going on. I also suggest talking to a pediatric nutritionist as well as a speech language pathologist and an occupational therapist. Here are some (certainly not all) of the medical reasons we often times see kids that are picky eaters:

- 1- They suffer from GERD (reflux)
- 2) They had later to be diagnosed Celiac Disease which is an intolerance to gluten (found in so many of the things we eat).
- 3) They have oral-motor hypersensitivity (their mouth is overly sensitive to certain tastes, textures and sensations).
- 4) Oral-motor hypotonia and hyposensitivity (their mouth is under sensitive and their muscles are weak, we often see kids with this diagnosis stuff their mouth with food)
- 5) Allergies or intolerances to a variety of foods including milk.

6) Sensory Integration issues (organizing and integrating how our bodies feel).

This is certainly not meant to scare anyone. A lot of picky eaters are just going through a pretty normal phase of development. Here's a little story about my husband, from when he was 3-5 years old his mother told me that all he ate was fried flounder while sitting under the kitchen table. He's now a healthy adult that eats a varied diet of fruits, vegetables, protein (and very little fried flounder).

1. Orange Crunchers

Once a child develops an aversion to a food because of either a power struggle and forcing it upon them (I hear my mom's voice in my head right now saying "EAT YOUR BRUSSEL SPROUTS") it is not impossible to get them to try the food. This is not to say you should do your best 007 work and hide it in some other food that he likes. This is where I use the technique of "renaming and reshaping".

1. Take baby carrots, slice them super thin and put them in a opaque cup. NOTE: don't ever cut and prepare these fun new foods in front of the child since the mystery of it adds to the excitement.
2. Rename them "orange crunchers", I even might refer to them as "orange cruncher candy" since hearing "candy" often times peaks a child's interest.
3. Then tell the child if they do a really good job, you will give them an "orange cruncher" and they need to be very careful because "orange crunchers" can make very loud sounds in your mouth and who knows what will happen to mommy when she hears the loud "orange cruncher" crunch.
4. Then as your child bites down on the "orange cruncher" be sure to do anything possible to make your reaction incredibly funny for your child. I have the tendency to cover my ears saying "ouch!" while possibly convulsing on the floor (hey, anything for a laugh).
5. I then follow the orange cruncher with a sip of juice in order to cleanse the palate.
6. Don't do too many orange crunchers during one activity time. Initially, until your child develops a taste for it, you want him to consider it a treat.

Note: It takes a child 20 "tastes" of something before developing a taste for it. So take your time.

2. Green Monster

I work with a great little boy named, Alexander. His mom once reported to me that he won't eat anything green so I made it my mission to show him green can be good. It worked!

- 1- Cut raw green beans into small pieces (about a centimeter) and put them in a cup. How many mothers just fell over at the thought of a five year old actually eating raw green beans? Well, get up, dust yourself off and pull yourself together, it's possible.
- 2- Tell your child that you have secret magic candy in your cup that will turn him into a green monster!
- 3- Proceed to eat a "green monster (candy if you wish)" yourself and then roar and go nibble/tickle your little picky eater.
- 4- Let him have his turn becoming the green monster by eating a little piece. When he becomes the green monster you should become very, very afraid and run and hide under a table. Again, you're goal is to make your child think this game of eating is so much fun that he doesn't even realize that he is putting something green in his mouth.

NOTE: If your child gags, let him spit it out, get a sip of drink and then he should still become the green monster. You want to reward him for trying and you also want him to forget the gagging incident so quickly so he is willing to try it again a few days later. We always want this to be a positive experience.

3. Win the Race!

This activity not only helps the picky eater but also slow eaters.

- 1- Put a food item that you would like your child to eat in front of him and in front of you on a table. Remember to “reshape and rename”.
- 2- Tell him whoever gets it in his mouth without using his hands and chews and swallows it first wins.
- 3- I usually use some sort of sensory or vestibular prize like, “who ever wins will get a piggy back ride up and down the stairs.” Try not to win yourself being that I doubt your five year old could hold you!
- 4- Remember to get really excited when he wins. Give him a high five, and give him the best ride since that trip to Disney World when you threw up on the tea cups.

NOTE: Not too fast now! Choking is not the goal!

4. Win the Marathon!

This activity can work on mixing textures, which can be a big issue with picky eaters.

- 1- Line up 3 foods in front of him and 3 foods in front of you on opposite sides of the child sized table. NOTE: I suggest doing all these activities in a play room setting since your child may have an aversion to the kitchen table if he has some bad memories there.
- 2- The food, initially, should consist of 2 of the same items he loves (such as 2 Goldfish) and one newly introduced food that is bite-sized, renamed and reshaped.
- 3- Then do the same as “Win the Race”, some of the language I tend to use is “Let’s see who’s going to win this race! Who ever wins will get 40 big pushes on the swing! Who ever gobbles up these treats and then touches the door first will win!”

NOTE: Same way I suggest renaming and reshaping, I also suggest using new words to describe “eating” such as “gobble up”, “chow down”, “slurp”, and “munch on”.

5. Bob For Apples

This is an oldie but a goodie. If your child is more terrified of biting into a raw fruit than going to the doctor for shots then why not try this old party standard.

1- a transparent bowl 3 quarters filled with water

2- fill with 2-3 apples

3- take turn bobbing with your child.

4- have your child be able to bite the apple and take it out of the bowl. Your child does not necessarily have to chew and swallow a piece of the apple. Taking it out of the bowl with his teeth is sufficient in getting him used to the taste and texture. After some practice with this, biting and eating an apple will be as easy as pie! Apple pie that is.

6. A Pear Face Only a Mother Could Love

This activity could be done with any fruit that a child would need to bite into. The idea is that after he is done with the pear, he will have carved a funny face out of it by taking little bites out of it.

- 1- Start with a pear and tell your child “we’re going to make our own dolls out of these tasty treats! I hope yours isn’t so funny that I might make pee pee in my pants!”
- 2- Then show your child how it’s done by biting a little piece out to make an eye, then another, then a nose and then if you’re really gutsy, little bites to make a mouth. You could either spit the pieces out or chew them up and swallow them. You want your child to see that you’re having fun here and there is no pressure to eat it. Remember we want him to develop tastes for things not force him to eat before he’s really ready.
- 3- When your little pear face is done, maybe put some yarn on his head or put a little hat on him for a finished look.
- 4- Have your child make his own pear face and then play with them together. He could get really creative by making a pear monster with maybe only one eye!

7. Orange Smiles

Yet another oldie but a goodie. Remember putting orange peels in our mouths and then smiling? Well, this is it! But this time it's for increasing your child's sensory tolerance while thinking his mom is absolutely hysterical.

- 1- Start by taking your turn first. Remember, by showing him that you could do it, will take away some of the fear. Also, if he's not ready to put it in his mouth try baby steps like having him help you place it in your own mouth or maybe he can help by peeling the orange away from the peel.
- 2- Remove the peel from the orange so it's crescent shaped and able to fit easily in his mouth.
- 3- Have him put it in his mouth and give you that big orange smile! Remember, he's doing this to be really funny so don't forget to laugh and have a good time!
- 4- Now you're probably wondering...but he's not eating the orange. Remember you're doing this in steps so step one could be simply helping you with your orange peel, step 2 could be he puts his own orange peel in his mouth to make an orange smile, step 3 could be, "hey, help me get the orange peel ready! Can you help me by biting off the orange so only the orange peel is left?" Tada! No more fears of scurvy! Your child eats oranges!

8. Peanut Butter Nail Polish

Warning: Little girls love this one. The idea of this one can be done with any food with a similar texture or consistency to peanut butter.

1- Start by telling your little girl about when you go get your nails done at the nail salon (yeah! Like you have time for that anymore!)

2- Tell her that today your going to play “beauty salon” with her. You might want to get some new paint brushes and little colored cups to put in the “polish” (aka peanut butter).

3- Have her pick her polish and prepare to put it on one nail.

4- The idea is to get her to lick off the nail polish before having a chance to put it on the next nail so say something like, “Okay! I’m going to have to turn around now and get something out of my makeup kit! You better not lick off all that yummy pretend nail polish!”

5- At this point, she will lick it off. When you turn back around, you might want to say, “Hmm! That’s strange! I thought I already started putting nail polish on that nail! I must be going crazy! I better try again!”

6- Repeat the process a couple times with the same “polish” and then say, “This color just is not working! I better try another color!” This way you are introducing new tastes and varying them during the same activity.

NOTE: Some children are very tactile defensive and it might be an activity in itself to just have the “nail polish” on their fingers let alone licking it off.

9. Slurp ‘Em Up Spaghetti

As a speech pathologist, I often use this activity not only as a fun food building task but also with the kids that have very low facial muscle tone. These are the kids that tend to do a little too much drooling! I call them part of the “wet shirt” club.

- 1) Get a piece of spaghetti in a bowl.
- 2) Slurp the spaghetti up (a la “Lady and the Tramp”)
- 3) Now give him his own bowl and see who could finish slurping up the spaghetti strand first.
- 4) This activity is not only a great way to introduce pasta to your child but also great to build up those mouth muscles.
- 5) Once he has beaten you a couple times, you can go to the next level which is giving him a piece of spaghetti in a bowl that has been coated in some sort of a sauce (marinara, Bolognese, alfredo, etc.). Now don’t use too much sauce, it’s just a coating so that the taste is different.

10. Tic Tac Turkey

- 1- Cut little bite size pieces of turkey cold cuts into little circles and “x”s. Remember to do this before introducing the game to your child. The mystery is part of the fun and it’s also an important step in renaming and reshaping.
- 2- Make a tic tac toe board and explain the general concept (modify as needed).
- 3- Play tic tac toe with the turkey. If he wins, he gets to eat the circles.
- 4- Another variation of this is he has to place the turkey pieces on the game board with his mouth.

11. Gross, You Just Ate an Eye!

- 1- Draw a face on a paper plate.
- 2- Put two Cheerios on for the eyes, a cracker for the nose and a licorice for the lips. (The idea at this point is to use all foods that he likes).
- 3- Get him to eat the eye then run away in disgust and hide under the sofa cushion.
- 4- Now that you have your child in absolute hysterics, try replacing one of the face parts with a new food item like half of peeled grape or a raisin.
- 5- Remember to not make a big deal of putting this new food item on the face, just treat it as you did the liked food item.
- 6- Tell him to eat the eyes or turn around pretending to get something as he “sneaks eating the eyes”.
- 7- Turn back around and run and hide under the sofa cushions again.

12. Puppet Picnic

This terrific idea I took from Joanne Hanson's book, *Progress with Puppets*. Sometimes kids not only don't want to eat a food but they are afraid to go anywhere near it. This is where a puppet that can swallow comes in to play. Even if you don't have an actual swallowing puppet, you can make one by cutting a small hole in the back of the puppets throat. Again, you don't want to do the prep work in front of your child since it can be pretty traumatizing to see Mommy sticking a pair of scissors in the back of your son's favorite puppet's mouth.

- 1- The idea of this activity is to have your child feed the puppet the food. He does not have to eat it himself but just to have him handle the food and place it in the puppet's mouth will help his sensory system get used to the food.
- 2- Have your child pick up the piece of food such as an orange cruncher (carrot slice) or a crazy cube (otherwise known as a cube of turkey) and feed it to the puppet.
- 3- Have the puppet swallow it and have the puppet do a crazy dance.
- 4- If the dance is just crazy and funny enough, your child just might want to try a crazy cube himself so you can see your child's crazy dance.
- 5- If swallowing the new food is too scary, you might want to start with having him just touch his lips with the food.

13. Crazy Cube Toss

- 1- This game works with any type of food but I prefer to use it for proteins such as cubed turkey, meatloaf or chicken. These cubes should be an appropriate size so the child can not choke on them. Always remember that these games should be done with a supervising adult.
- 2- The idea of this game is to throw the cubes into the child's mouth like it's a basketball net.
- 3- We can always start this game by having the child throw the crazy cube into Mommy's mouth. If he gets it in, then it is Mommy's turn to try to get it into the child's mouth.
- 4- This game can also have a score board to see how many cubes have landed in the mouths.
- 5- Again, you want to progress to the point that the child will feel comfortable swallowing the crazy cube. You might want to have a bowl near by so the child can spit it out if he's not ready to swallow it yet. Even if it is in his mouth for a short amount of time, it makes the food less scary and helps your child develop a taste for it.

14. The Steps to getting Comfortable

As I've mentioned in previous tips, it is not as simple as introducing a food and having your child chew and swallow it and be happy. We need to keep in mind the sensory component and here is the list of steps you should keep in mind.

- 1- Touching the food with his finger
- 2- Picking up the food and putting it in a bowl
- 3- Picking up the food and touching his cheek with it.
- 4- Picking up the food and putting it to his lips
- 5- Letting the food touch his tongue for an instant
- 6- Letting it sit on his tongue for a second with his mouth open.
- 7- Letting the food sit on his tongue for a second with his mouth closed.
- 8-

-Sensory- going from touch to eat

-Nuk/vibration decreasing hypersensitivity

-guess what's on your tongue. Blind fold, put foods he likes first. Take off the tongue 1st step since it's to increase sensory awareness, next step for him to eat what it is. Ex. "it's an orange cruncher!" (don't forget to say, "ouch! My ears!" when he crunches. Always start with him putting the treats on your tongue first so he sees it's not scary.

-fruit smoothie to introduce fruit, sucking through big straw or crazy straw

Note: water down juices sometimes they are just too potent. Then eventually decrease water ratio to increase tolerance