

How to Treat Picky Eating

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When people talk about kids who are picky eaters, the conversation usually revolves around how to encourage them to eat a better variety of foods, not necessarily *why* the child is a picky eater. And yet, the *why* of picky eating can play a major role in helping kids overcome it.

It's true that some kids are just fussy. They like what they like and they don't want to eat other foods.

But some other causes of picky eating – the extreme version of the issue – are more complicated than that. Here are some examples:

- If a child has a decreased awareness in his or her mouth, they can struggle to feel their food, become overwhelmed, and give up on eating.
- If a child has decreased coordinated movements of oral structures, they are not able to smoothly move the chewed food in their mouth and are at an increased risk of choking.
- Muscle weakness in the mouth can cause kids to avoid foods, like meats, that require stronger jaw muscles.
- In some cases, kids who struggle with certain food textures are found to have tactile defensiveness. This is when a child struggles pro-



cessing touch and may lead the child to avoid foods like applesauce or yogurt, for instance.

So what do parents do?

- Get an oral motor/feeding evaluation from a professional such as an occupational therapist or speech-language pathologist.
- During the evaluation, all components of eating will be assessed. These include structures used for feeding and the child's strength and coordination.
- The professional will also evaluate how the child processes touch and what textures he or she avoids. In general, the child's reaction to various foods will be recorded to determine the root of the behavior and how best to help.
- Often occupational therapy can help address the sensory components necessary to "ready" a child for mealtime.
- Sometimes the implementation of a playful approach to feeding is recommended. This can include exploration of the food, preparing the food and interacting with it in various positive ways.

Overall, therapy for extreme picky eating involves collaborating with the parent to help the child overcome the issue and enjoy a varied and healthy diet.



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