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## 11 Tips for Turning Picky Eaters Into Foodies

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Hardly anything causes parents more stress at the dinner table than a picky eater. Not to mention that having one at home could add to your grocery budget. You may be wasting food while trying unsuccessfully to get them to branch out, or spending extra to keep the fridge and pantry stocked with the few things they will eat.

When she was four years old, Frugal Foodie could be counted on to eat just five things, only rarely in combination and *never* served touching each other on the same plate: vanilla yogurt, baby carrots, canned chicken noodle soup, Saltine crackers and pastina.

Happily for all involved, that phase passed quickly (more on the “how” below). Today, the number of foods Frugal Foodie doesn’t eat can be counted on one hand, and even those she’s open to trying occasionally in new and different ways. (Can anyone suggest a world-changing recipe for eggplant?)

There's a lot of psychology that goes into picky eating, so much so that Duke University and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center are currently conducting a study to determine its causes and weigh if extreme picky eating is actually a medical disorder. But there are also plenty of creative tricks that make trying something new a fun adventure instead of a risk:

### **Enlist a sous chef**

Ask your picky eater to help you cook. "Often, kids will think they don't like a food, but when you ask for the child's help in buying the food, washing and preparing it, a sense of ownership takes over," says Jill Houk, a chef with Centered Chef Food Studios in Chicago. "Your child — or adult — will be intrigued to taste whatever he or she helped cook."

### **Lead by example**

"If you don't like to eat something, don't expect your child to want to eat it," says Chef Walter Pisano of Tulio Restaurant in Seattle. Why would they give a food a fair chance if you're obviously grossed out?

### **Skewer it**

"It's always more fun to eat something off a stick," says Sara Vance of Fitness Fun 4 All in San Diego. Skewered, her fruit dipper recipe works as a substitute for either breakfast or frozen, for dessert.

### **Try a different recipe**

Picky eating is often about texture, points out registered dietician [Kate Scarlata](#). "Try fruits and vegetables in different forms such as cooking veggies in soups or roasting in olive oil to introduce different tastes and textures that may appeal more to a picky eater," she says. For a simple roast, add olive oil to veggies, wrap in foil and cook at 400 degrees for at least 20 minutes.

### **Play with your food**

Broccoli is more enticing when, with a little make-believe, it's a "forest" and you're a giant rampaging through. "Create a friendly spider using a round slice of cucumber and eight pepper strips for legs," says Candi Wingate, the president of Nannies4Hire, or "stick a bunch of grapes or cherry tomatoes together with dabs of cream cheese for a silly caterpillar."

### **Tweak favorite dishes**

Incorporate new foods into clamored-for ones. Sarah Hetland, an editor for Recipe Lion, suggests trying eggplant on pizza. Another option: chicken and broccoli in macaroni and cheese.

## **Be honest**

“Recognize the fact that kids say they hate something but gobble it when hidden, suggesting that they simply have a mental block,” says Rock Harper, the Season 3 winner of “Hell’s Kitchen” and author of “44 Things Parents Should Know About Healthy Cooking for Kids.” If you hide foods in other foods (like white bean puree in cookies or cauliflower in mashed potatoes), let them know about it after — and remind them how much they enjoyed those treats.

## **Add a restaurant touch**

Try a last-minute tableside addition like a squirt of lemon juice or a little grated Parmesan. That bit of restaurant theater can make a new food seem fancier and more appealing, Pisano says.

## **Give in to advertisements**

Just this once, anyway. “Some marketing genius packaged edamame [soy beans] in Dora the Explorer and SpongeBob SquarePants packaging, which makes the snack seem much more appealing to a picky child,” Wingate says.

## **Incorporate dips**

They make food more fun somehow, and there are opportunities to make new foods either the dip itself or the item being dipped. Hetland has a recipe for breaded zucchini sticks that make a great fry replacement. For dips, Wingate suggests trying hummus or sweet potato spread.

## **Know when to stop**

Don’t try to introduce a food too often — otherwise, the person you would like to eat the food will never want to try it, Houk says. She recommends re-trying once a year for adults, and at least quarterly for kids. “Have the [picky eater] take one bite, chew it well and swallow it,” she says. If they don’t like it, let it go and try again in a few months.

Frugal Foodie’s parents took this advice to heart, even going a step further and telling her that certain dishes “weren’t allowed” or “too expensive” for kids. Naturally, that made her more curious about trying some, especially when Dad would carefully sneak her a taste or two when Mom wasn’t looking. (Mom, of course, was fully aware and encouraging.)

*Frugal Foodie is a journalist based in New York City who spends her days writing about personal finance and obsessing about what she’ll have for dinner. Chat with her on Twitter through @MintFoodie.*

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