



## Picky eating or normal preschooler eating behaviors?

Feeding a preschooler can feel frustrating. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar? Refusing to eat anything other than one or two foods. A meltdown when there is green food on the plate. Declaring suddenly, they no longer like their favorite food. Playing with food at the table. These experiences may lead us to declare we have a picky eater. The reality is this behavior is normal and usually temporary. Let's review tips for working through these normal phases of development.

**Desire for independence.** Preschoolers have an interest in doing things themselves. We can support this at mealtime by offering structured, healthy choices. Avoid asking open-ended questions like, "What do you want for dinner?" or yes-no questions like, "Do you want peas?" Instead, give kids two options: "Would you like peas or carrots?" This gives your child control within the structure you provide.

**Continuing to develop skills.** Preschoolers are continuing to master the muscle movements required to serve and feed themselves. Build opportunities into the snack or meal routine for them to get involved. This includes setting the table, serving themselves, pouring liquids, and cleaning up. Easy-to-use serving tools, like tongs, and child-sized utensils will make it easier for them to be involved with fewer messes. But messes will still happen. When they do, work together to teach them how to clean up.

**Interest in being helpful and spending time with you.** Preparing meals can feel like a chore that takes you away from spending time with kids. Involving preschoolers with food prep can be fun, educational, helpful, and get them interested in trying food. Lots of wins for everyone. Guide them in measuring, pouring, mixing, and assembling ingredients. Praising them for their helpfulness will get them excited about helping again.

**Learning table manners.** Preschoolers can follow easy commands. Guide them with simple, positive reminders like, "Please use your spoon." Preschoolers also learn from example. Sitting down to eat together will show them table manners in action. In no time, they will understand what is expected during mealtime. How you talk about food will influence how they talk and feel about food. When a child says, "Ew, that is gross. I don't like it," you can respond with a teachable moment. Try something like, "Everyone likes different things. What don't you like about it today?" or "We have to try a bite of something before we know whether we like it."

**Fear of new or different foods.** New tastes, textures, or colors can be uncomfortable. It's no wonder preschoolers want to stick with what they know. It is normal for kids to refuse certain foods while requesting others. Remember, they cannot learn to like new things if they are not served. Offer favorite or familiar healthy foods alongside other healthy food in each meal. This will expose your child to other foods in a lower stakes way. You can also gently encourage them to try one bite of the less favorite or familiar food. One final tip, consider avoiding mixed dishes, like casseroles, that have many ingredients. Instead serve everything separate. For example, serve deconstructed tacos in which the shell and fillings are scooped separately on the plate. This allows kids to choose what they want from what is offered.

Each phase of development brings new opportunities to learn and grow together. The preschool phase is learning about how to encourage children to try new and different foods while respecting their choices about how much or whether they eat what is provided. It is also about building a foundation of food preparation, serving, and feeding skills that will leave them feeling confident in the kitchen and beyond. Some meals will be smoother than others. Celebrate the great ones and move on from the others. You've got this.

## Reference

United States Department of Agriculture.

(n.d.). *Preschoolers*. MyPlate. <https://www.myplate.gov/life-stages/preschoolers>

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