

Supporting a Child's Mealtime Journey

Building skills and comfort around mealtimes

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Who can benefit from this information?

- Almost all caregivers of children with picky or hesitant eaters
- Your child may benefit from specific strategies to add on to these strategies, however these are the underpinnings of a picky eating plan that:
 - respects a child
 - teaches them to listen to their body
 - allows to them to add foods at their own pace and comfort level

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What this Session is Not

- A magic and quick strategy to “solve” picky eating
- Recipes or meals to hide or trick your child into eating vegetables
- All of the picky eating strategies wrapped up in one presentation
- A replacement for professional and individualized consultation
- The end of your picky eating journey

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Session Objectives

1. Outline the start of a planned approach for how to manage picky eaters
2. Understand how long it takes to see progress with picky eating
3. Assist caregivers to determine the root cause of their child's picky eating
4. Assist caregivers with coming up with a plan for where to start or to expand their current strategies
5. Help caregivers understand where they can access support when the “basic” strategies don't work

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Roles of Different Professionals

Speech and Language Pathologist

Oral motor skills, language acquisition and understanding

Physiotherapist

Gross motor skill acquisition, posture and positioning, core strength

Dietician

Nutrition information, food recommendations, growth/weight checks

Occupational Therapist

Sensory and regulation, oral motor, posture and positioning

Pediatrician/Doctor

growth/weight checks, assess and referral for physical needs, supplemental nutrition, bloodwork

Naturopath

Complete bloodwork and holistic assessments, diet analysis, supplemental nutrition

Psychologist

Parenting support, emotional regulation, anxiety support

Teacher/Caregiver/External Family

Support system, extension of family unit, component of picky eating team

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Universal Picky Eating Strategies

- This is the foundation upon which all other strategies are supported on
- Without a strong foundation, the rest of the structure (aka picky eating strategies) will crumble
- When there is stress in the foundation, everything else will crumble or falter
- This is the starting point in your journey

So how do we build the strong foundation and reduce mealtime stress?

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Start by Defining Roles at Mealtimes

Child's roles are to decide:

- Whether to eat*
- How much to eat*

They will also communicate (through language or behaviour) when they are feeling upset or overwhelmed

Caregiver's roles are to decide:

- What to serve *
- When to serve*
- Where to serve*

Your job is to recognize your child's emotions, allow them to have their opinions, but stick to your roles as you support them through the discomfort

*This is from the Division of Responsibility from Ellyn Satter: <https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/>

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But What Does this Look Like in Reality?

- Always serve at least one safe or preferred food as part of the meal
- Deconstructed meals are the easiest way to not be a short order cook
- Even if your child's safe food doesn't "match" the meal, serve it anyways for everyone to eat from so it becomes family food
- Remind your child about when the next time food will be served is
- Draw out or write out the "jobs" of everyone at meals and let the family know that things are changing
- Refrain from commenting on what they do or don't eat, keep it neutral and talk about something outside of the food

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Avoid...	Instead...
Hiding foods in child's accepted foods	Tell a child what is included in their food
Telling a child it's the "same" as their accepted food, when it's just similar	Tell them how it's similar and how it's different, present the preferred with the similar side by side
Giving large plates or servings of food your child likely won't eat	Let them serve themselves or place a dime sized piece of non-preferred foods on their plate
Being a short order cook or asking your child what they want to eat	Offer at least one preferred food at a meal
Tell them they won't like something or saying to someone they won't eat it	Let them know it's ok to still be learning about new foods

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Avoid	Instead
Giving up if a strategy doesn't work in the first week	Stick with it and communicate with your child through the challenges
Rewarding or promising desert or a preferred food for eating something	Keep all food even and if desert is offered, then everyone gets it regardless of what is offered
"No Thank you" bites	If they feel brave they can try anything served
Clearing the plate or taking 2 more bites	Ask them to check in with how their tummy feels, is it feeling full? Cue them to eat until they are full

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Posture and Positioning

- Ensure your child's posture and positioning at the table is optimal and one of the first steps we do along with focusing on reducing stress at meals.
- A child who is unsupported physically, can not be expected to sit still or perform the complex fine motor and oral motor skills required for eating.



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What's Next?

- After reducing the stress, you need to determine the root cause of your child's picky eating, and then address that
- If you try to work on the root cause while your child is still stressed and anxious at meals or around food, it will backfire and create extra pressure and stress for you and your child.

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Root Causes of Picky Eating

Oral Motor	Gross Motor
Sensory/Interoceptive Awareness	Physical/Medical
Generalized Anxiety	Compounding Effect

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Oral Motor Challenges

- Mouth breather at night, during the day or both
- Difficulty chewing with their mouth closed, despite prompting
- Food stuffing
- Pocketing foods, keeping foods in cheek
- Coughing during or after eating and drinking
- Food falling out of mouth
- Using hands to keep food in mouth instead of tongue and lips
- Using hands to place food on back teeth, instead of tongue (we bite on our front teeth, then use our tongue to move it to our molars and chew)
- Difficulty separating their jaw movements from tongue and/or lip movements
- Fatigue from eating



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Oral Motor Assessment for Eating

Lateral tongue movements	Cheek strength and range of motion
Tongue midblade and tip elevation	Lip strength and range of motion
Jaw strength/endurance	Hard palate shape
Tongue/jaw/lip dissociation	Oral awareness

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Sensory Challenges

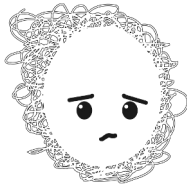
- Difficulty understanding or tuning into their body being hungry (poor interoceptive awareness)
- Difficulty sitting still or staying at the table as their body wants to move
- Difficulty handling smells, sights or noises (like the sounds of others chewing)
- Gagging prior to the food being in their mouth
- Food stuffing
- Pocketing foods/keep foods in cheek



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Generalized Anxiety

- Can lead to a reduction appetite
- Can create changes in the gut and digestive system
- Less ability to be adventurous at the table or in other areas of life
- seeks out comfort or familiar foods during meals
- Seeks aspects of control, can appear as control over food



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STEPS TO EATING

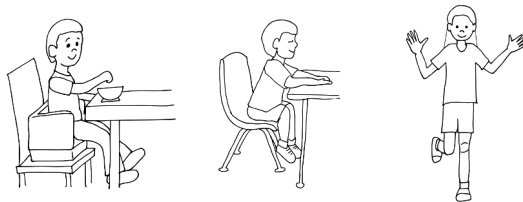
EATING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ chews and swallows whole bolus independently ➤ chews, swallows whole bolus with drink ➤ chews, swallows some and spits some ➤ bites, chews "x" times & spits out ➤ bites pieces, holds in mouth for "x" seconds & spits out ➤ bites off piece & spits out immediately ➤ full tongue lick ➤ licks lips or teeth 	TASTE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ tip of tongue, top of tongue ➤ teeth ➤ lips ➤ nose, underneath nose ➤ chin, cheek ➤ top of head ➤ chest, neck ➤ arm, shoulder ➤ whole hand ➤ fingertips, fingerpads ➤ one finger tip
	TOUCH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ leans down or picks up to smell ➤ odor in child's forward space ➤ odor at table ➤ odor in room
	SMELLS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ uses utensils or container to serve self onto own plate/space ➤ uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink outside of own space ➤ uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink for others ➤ assists in preparation/set up with food
	INTERACTS WITH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ looks at food when directly in child's space ➤ being at the table with the food just outside of child's space ➤ being at the table with the food ½ way across the table ➤ being at the table with the food on the other side of the table ➤ being in the same room
TOLERATES	

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Gross Motor Challenges

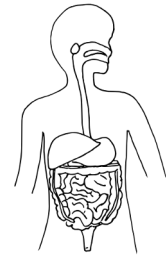
- Difficulty with core strength, balance, and maintaining a seated posture at the table
- Unsupported feet and poor posture at the table
- Tightness or restrictions in neck or upper body



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Medical Challenges

- Regularly burping
- Reflux and/or vomiting
- Stomach or GI challenges
- Choking on foods (different from gagging)
- Constipation
- Allergies
- Difficulty with nasal breathing while chewing and eating



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Compounding effect

- Child may have eaten well as an infant and then gradually started getting pickier and pickier
- Sometimes it may have started as an oral motor or physical issue, then a child gradually realized certain foods were easier to eat, caused less discomfort, or simply tasted good and then they started reducing their exposure to various sensory properties of food which morphed into a sensory challenge now due to limited exposure

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Caregiver's Action Plan

1. Create positive and pleasant mealtime environments with clearly defined roles so that you build a strong foundation around food and meals
2. Ensure posture and positioning is optimal at the table
3. Figure out the root cause of your child's picky eating and seek support from the appropriate professional to help target this. In the meantime, focus on step one and two.
4. Go slow and at your child's pace. Picky eating can take YEARS and HUNDREDS of exposures to start to see progress. It's not your job to "get" them to eat.
5. Remember the long game: having a child to feeling safe to explore new foods, on their own terms, at their pace, with caregivers creating the space to do so.

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Additional Support

Picky Eating Resources through AHS

- <https://peas.albertahealthservices.ca/>
- Call 811 to ask to book an appointment with a dietician funded through AHS
- Outpatient Feeding and swallowing clinic through ACH for more serious feeding/swallowing concerns
 - <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=1077164&serviceAtFacilityID=1120210>
- Access to a pediatric occupational therapist through Pediatric Community Rehab for general picky eating concerns
 - <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/service.aspx?id=1060203&facilityid=1036102>

Social Media Resources with Evidence Based Approaches:

- kids.eat.in.color (Instagram)
- mymunchbug_melaniepotock (Instagram) & Melanie Potock (Facebook)
- Your Kids Table (Facebook) and website: <https://yourkidstable.com/>

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