

Is Your Child a “Picky Eater”?

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Does it seem like your child is eating the same three or four foods day after day? Are mealtimes frustrating, sometimes involving throwing foods, refusing foods, and spitting food out of his/her mouth? We, at Young Talkers, received specialized training at a conference regarding the Sequential-Oral-Sensory (SOS) approach to feeding to work with children that are problem feeders. Eating and swallowing are very complex processes. Eating involves all of the sensory systems in the body. Eating is a learned behavior; it is not instinctive except during the first month of life. The process of swallowing involves the coordination of 26 different muscles and six cranial nerves. For children with feeding problems, eating can be up to a 32 step process. One of the many feeding myths out there is that if a child is hungry enough, he/she will eat. They will not starve themselves. This is false. The bottom line regarding this myth is that if a child does not have the skills to do the task of feeding, it does not matter how hungry he/she is.

So what does this all mean for your children that have problems with eating? How do we get these children to eat new and different types of food? The human body's natural reaction to eating new foods is to reject it. Exposing children to new foods is the key. Some children do not have the oral motor skills to manage certain foods and therefore refuse those foods when they are put on their plate. These children may have difficulty with actually chewing and managing specific foods such as different types of meat and raw vegetables. Other children may have texture aversions causing them to reject foods as soon as they touch the food. Children may also reject a food based on how it looks or smells. Regardless of which one of these reasons your child rejects food, it is important to address these feeding problems.

So what can you do at home if this sounds like your child? In your daily routine, it is important to have regular family mealtimes at about the same time. If the child is old enough, you could involve them in the actual preparation of the meal. For some children, it is helpful to give them transitioning time from play to mealtime by telling them that it will be time to eat in three minutes. Before mealtime begins, the routine could be to wash their hands first and then go to the table. Presenting him/her with an empty plate at the beginning of mealtime could decrease stress initially. It is important that he/she have seating that provides for postural stability and somewhere for their feet to be stable upon whether it is the floor or the bottom of the high chair. It would be beneficial if the meal could be served in different bowls and everyone passed the bowls around the table and

put a little of everything on their plate including the child if the child is old enough to eat table foods. The parents can use mealtimes to teach the child about eating. The focus should be on the food and not the child. It is important to avoid putting undue stress and pressure on the child during mealtime because that could actually decrease his/her appetite. The parents and siblings could model chewing and show the child how they are eating and chewing the food, as well as talking about the food. Families could discuss the food by saying for example, "This food is crunchy and sweet". These are ways to help break those barriers down that the child might have about the foods. These are just a few ways to help your child begin to become more accepting of different types of foods.

If you feel that your child has feeding difficulties as discussed in this article, please feel free to contact Young Talkers at 457-1053 or by e-mail at Nicole@YoungTalkers.com. We are speech-language pathologists trained in the Sequential-Oral-Sensory (SOS) approach to feeding that are ready to help your children. This approach to feeding is a non-invasive developmental approach. It is designed to assess and address all the factors involved in feeding difficulties. This approach allows a child to interact with food in a playful, non-stressful way. It focuses on increasing a child's comfort level through exploring and learning about the different properties of foods, including texture, smell, taste, and consistency. The SOS approach follows a hierarchy to feeding from tolerating foods in the room, interacting with the food, smelling, touching, tasting, and eventually, eating the food.

Young Talkers, LLC is a private pediatric speech therapy clinic that has been open in the Myrtle Beach area for over two years. We are here to provide quality speech therapy services for children in our local community. Nicole Young-Cline is the owner of the clinic and is a certified speech-language pathologist who has been practicing since 2003. If you have any concerns about your child's speech and/or language skills, please contact us about our free speech-language screenings at (843) 457-1053 or visit our website at www.YoungTalkers.com.

Toomey, K., Ph.D. (2009, April). *Picky Eaters vs. Problem Feeders: The SOS Approach to Feeding*. Norfolk, VA.