

Picky Eating – Should I Worry?

One of the more common complaints from parents of toddlers is how picky they can seem to be when it comes to solid food. They like their simple carbs, maybe some fruit and maybe some veg, a bit of meat (perhaps), but nothing that looks like a well-balanced meal. Parents will try to do all sorts of things to create food that looks tempting, hide healthy foods in with the treats, and go to all sorts of lengths to make food that we can actually feel okay, if not good, about our toddlers eating. But through it all there is an overwhelming amount of stress and worry. Now I'm not going to suggest that you never need to worry about your toddler's diet because there are certainly things that can become a concern, but I also think we have missed some of the more important elements when it comes to how to avoid the pitfalls of this worry.

What Is Happening?

Let's first try to understand why our toddlers are such picky eaters. There are many hypotheses out there and all seem to have some validity. There is the idea that lots of foods could pose danger and so children avoid them not knowing they are safe. There is the idea that their taste buds are still developing and many foods will simply not taste as good to them as they do to us. There is the idea that they may not have been exposed to lots of flavours to adapt to them if they weren't breastfed or they were but mom's diet was rather plain. There is also the idea that because they have different nutritional needs at different points, they crave different foods that reflect these needs.

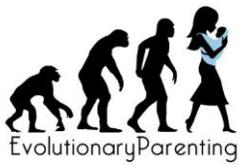
In short, there are many reasons for a toddler to be a picky eater. Knowing that it's not only okay, but normative can hopefully alleviate some of the worry that this is somehow something you, the parent, has done wrong.

How Did They Survive?

If it's so normal, how on earth did toddlers survive historically and still in non-Industrial cultures? Surely they all had to suffer from all sorts of ills due to nutrient deficiencies, right?

Here it looks probable that a couple things come into play. First is breastfeeding. In non-Industrial cultures, many toddlers are breastfed regularly and as research has highlighted the nutritional value of breast milk after age 1, there is good reason to think these kids were getting quite a bit from it. Specifically, 448 ml of breast milk in the second year provides (Dewey, 2001):

- 29% of energy requirements
- 43% of protein requirements
- 36% of calcium requirements
- 75% of vitamin A requirements



- 76% of folate requirements
- 94% of vitamin B12 requirements
- 60% of vitamin C requirements

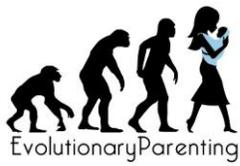
The second element is dirt and soil. Children and toddlers in particular used to spend a lot of time in soil that was healthy and not at all filled with chemicals. Dirt and soil are filled with iron, potassium, magnesium, calcium, and more and when children play in the dirt or mud, they inevitably end up ingesting some of this dirt and the minerals inside. It is unknown if they actually would get enough, but it is a plausible hypothesis with respect to the remaining minerals that are difficult to obtain otherwise.

What Can I Do?

If you are the parent of a picky eater, what can you do to avoid worrying about it? There are a few things:

1. Invest in a good multi-vitamin plus mineral. If you are at all worried about deficiencies, there are excellent plant-based vitamins that are made for toddlers and contain much-needed minerals as well. If you can regularly get your child to take this, you will likely feel less stressed about the picky eating.
2. Continue to nurse or use formula. If you are nursing, we know your toddler is getting the aforementioned goodies. If you aren't, you can still use formula which is fortified with the vitamins and minerals if that helps ease your anxiety. I know some people worry about toddlers with bottles and there are potential dental reasons to care, but it would be absolutely normal for a toddler to nurse and so the substitute we have can be equally valid.
3. Keep offering. You may sneak some veggies into muffins or smoothies, but you should always keep offering the wide variety of foods so your child can make a decision about trying it and eventually your kid may surprise you.
4. Don't make food a big deal. Often we make food a larger issue than it needs be and this has our toddlers dig their heels in even more. When this happens we can reinforce the problem because it's now about control instead of being open to trying new foods.
5. Be realistic. It is of course reasonable to have healthy options for your toddler, but also be realistic in what your toddler is willing to eat so you can find options that fit. If you only ever offer healthy foods your toddler has no interest in eating, you will have a large problem on your hands. Contrary to what people seem to believe, we do not eat anything when we get too hungry (unless we reach starvation which is a different process and so far down the line that we want to avoid that with our toddlers), but rather restrict the foods we'll eat.

If your child is healthy and growing, but just picky, then try to alleviate your own anxiety about it because chances are, they're doing just fine. If you are worried then you can talk to a pediatric nutritionist who can help guide you in ways to work on your toddler's eating without causing longer-term problems in their relationship with food.



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Tracy Cassels, PhD is the Director of Evolutionary Parenting, a science-based, attachment-oriented resource for families on a variety of parenting issues. In addition to her online resources, she offers one-on-one support to families around the world and is regularly asked to speak on a variety of issues from sleep to tantrums at conferences and in the media. She lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada with her husband, two children, two cats, and one dog.