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Tips for Picky Eaters at Camp

By Carol Ann Brannon, MS, RD, LD

Sleep-over camp is the highlight of summer for many children (and parents). Yet, for parents of an extremely picky eater; sleep-over camp may not be an option due to their child's very self-limited diet. The saying, "if you are really hungry, you will eat it" does not apply to extreme picky eaters. Children with sensory-based food aversions will refuse to eat regardless of how hungry they if they are not provided their preferred foods. The typical preferred foods of extreme picky eaters are beige or white in color, uniform in texture, and often easy to chew. The most popular foods of extreme picky eaters include sugary cereals, pop tarts, fish crackers, French fries and chicken nuggets (usually only from a specific fast-food restaurant), and macaroni and cheese from a box. While some fear snakes and spiders, for extreme picky eaters new foods trigger real fear and anxiety.

However, there is help, hope, and the possibility of summer camp for extreme picky eaters. Below are practical tips and strategies for helping extreme picky eaters navigate summer camp.

Prior to Camp: Begin by encouraging food *exploration*, *not eating*, new foods at home. Extreme picky eaters must be comfortable with a new food; the sight, smell, and feel of the food before they can actually try a bite. Casually discuss how *everything*, about camp, even the food, is an exciting adventure. Children often engage in activities at camp that are out of their comfort zone. Summer camp may be where a child gains self-confidence in their ability to try new activities and new foods.

1. Obtain a copy of the camp menu prior to your child's arrival. Know all the food options that are available for the campers at each meal. For example, if your child likes cereal with milk and cereal and milk is available at each meal then you can

be assured your child will have an option at each meal. Of course, eating cereal and milk at every meal is not ideal, but your child will not go hungry.

2. Know what the camp's policy is for picky eaters; explain to your child that part of the camp adventure is trying new things, as well as new foods.
3. Ramp up the range of foods your child is exposed to at home. Prepare and offer some of the same foods that will be offered at camp. Encourage your child at least keep the "new" food on their plate; do not force them to eat it. The more exposure a child has to a "new" food the more likely they are to try it. Did you know it can take up to 25 exposures to a new food before a child will accept/eat a "new" food? Keep trying.
4. Get your child involved in food preparation; a young cook is more likely to try a new food if they helped prepare it!
5. Discuss menu and food options that will be available at camp. Role play with your child different scenarios that might occur at camp. For example, if they have a cookout with hot dogs and your child does not like hot dog have your child discuss what they could do. Let your child come up with the solution.
6. Ask your child to make a list of foods he/she is open to trying at camp; assure them that they do *not* have to eat these foods, but you just want them to consider trying some new foods.
7. Above all, keep any and all discussions about camp food positive, pressure-free, and pleasant. These are proactive tips; however, be careful not to hyper-focus on your child's eating habits. Be optimistic; your child may become a summer camp food connoisseur!

Following the tips above can go a long way to helping your child enjoy camp. If your child has always struggled to eat partnering with a feeding therapist (an Occupational Therapist, Speech Therapist, or Registered Dietitian with specialized training and certification in feeding therapy) can be life-changing for you and your child. Eating is not instinctive; it is a learned skill that involves all the senses and every system of the body. Feeding problems are often linked to sensory processing problems. For example, they may be hypersensitive to the smells, textures, detest foods they refer to as "slimy," and melt-down if their hands get messy. The good news is that with feeding therapy, patience, and perseverance your child can learn to accept new foods and expand their diet to include colorful and texture-rich foods. For additional information about feeding therapy for sensory food aversions email Carol Ann Brannon MS RD LD at cabnutrition@bellsouth.net