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Picky Eaters versus Problem Feeders

By Carol Ann Brannon, MS, RD, LD

Eating skills and food preferences evolve and develop along a continuum throughout childhood. While we assume eating comes naturally, for many special needs children it can be an overwhelming experience. Eating is a complex process that involves all five senses, as well as the mechanics of chewing and swallowing. For many children with special needs, especially children with sensory integration challenges, eating may be problematic resulting in mealtime conflicts and parental concerns regarding nutritional status and the possible negative effect on growth and development.

Parents can help their children become healthier eaters. First, assess your child's eating habits and determine where they are on the eating continuum. At one end of the continuum are problem feeders, in the middle are picky eaters, and at the opposite end of the continuum are healthy eaters. The chart below outlines and compares the 3 categories of eaters along the eating skills and food preference continuum.

If your child has one or more characteristics of a problem feeder, then you may want to seek the assistance of a multidisciplinary feeding team. There is hope and help for children that struggle to eat! Consider it a success when your child allows a new food to be placed on their plate; celebrate the first bite of a new food (even if that first bite is spit out!). Remember, developing healthy eater is a process. Will success be worth you efforts? Yes, without a doubt, a healthy diet is essential to optimal wellness, cognitive development, and performance.

Characteristics of Problem, Picky, Healthy Eaters Problem Feeders

Food intake limited to 10-15 foods or less Limited food groups and/or avoidance of one or more food groups Limits/avoids certain food textures, smells, colors Typically love carbohydrate foods.

Experiences:

- Food Neophobia*
- Gagging
- Food Jags*
- May have special needs, medical impairments, and/or developmental delays
- At risk for nutritional deficiencies; may have experience delayed growth

Picky Eaters

- Selective food intake, but with persistence will try new foods
- May refuse a certain food one day, but will eat it on another day
- Food jags are temporary stages
- Consumes a variety of foods over the course of a week
- Enjoys a few number of colorful foods and textures
- Nutritional status may be adequate
- Normal growth and development
- Food refusal associated with demonstration of independence; with increasing age becomes less picky

Healthy Eaters

- Enjoys a variety of foods
- Adventurous: willing to try new foods
- Eats a rainbow of colorful foods and variety of textures
- Experience normal growth and development

***Terminology**

Food Neophobia: Fear of new foods; strong reactions to new foods: gags, becomes ill; overcome with anxiety and/or tantrums; occurs about age 2, but decreases around age 5

Food Jag: Occurs when a child will only eat one food item meal after meal, then one day refuses a food that has been their “staple” food; extremely limited food choices

Resources and References for Parents and Professionals:

Ernsperger, L and Stegen-Hanson, T. Just Take a Bite Easy, Effective Answers to Food Aversions and Eating Challenges! 2004

Piette, Linda. Just Two More Bites: Helping Picky Eaters Say Yes to Food. Three Rivers Publishing, 2006.

Slatter, Ellyn. “Child of Mine, Feeding with Love and Good Sense” 2000.

Slatter, Ellyn. Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: Orchestrating and Enjoying the Family Meal. Kelcy Press 2nd Edition, 2008.

