



# Picky eaters and what parents need to know

BY DR MOHD SHAH KAMARUDIN

**M**EALTIME should be the time in the day when families can relax and enjoy each other's company. For many parents, though, it feels like a war zone. The table is set for the meal. You have put in a lot of effort in the kitchen. Then the usual answer comes:

"I don't like this."  
"I'm not hungry."  
"I want something else."

If you've ever felt frustrated, worried or even guilty when your child refuses to eat, you're not alone. Parents often see picky eating as a problem, but it is also among the most misunderstood. The good news is that most picky eaters are just typical kids. It does not imply you are a bad parent or that your child will grow up hungry.

## So what is picky eating?

In scientific terms, researchers explain that picky eating lacks a fixed definition. Instead, it is generally described as a pattern in which children show strong food preferences, reject foods they already know and are reluctant to try new ones. This combination of limited variety and food neophobia is what researchers commonly measure in studies of child eating behaviour. At this stage, children are learning to be independent. Saying "no" even to food is part of that process. Some children are also more sensitive by nature. What feels "normal" to us may feel overwhelming to them. This is not at all like having significant feeding problems. If a child is developing well, has a good weight and height, is active and is generally healthy, picky eating is usually just a phase, not a diagnosis.

## Why do some children become picky eaters?

Parents often think their child is being difficult or stubborn. In reality, picky eating is not usually about how someone behaves. Some kids are sensitive to food texture; for example, soft foods might be unpleasant and mixed foods can be confusing. Some children are careful about things they do not know. For other children, trying new foods can be very distressing. But one factor we do not talk about enough is

mealtime pressure. Children rapidly learn that food means stress when it becomes a test: "finish your plate", "just one more bite" or "eat this for mummy". The more adults push, the more kids fight back. Kids do not want to "win" this. Stress interferes with hunger and trust.

Most parents respond to picky eating by simply trying harder. They coax, they plead, they bargain with dessert or they turn on a screen just to get a few bites in. Some end up cooking a separate meal, while others quietly stop serving certain foods altogether because their child has already labelled them as "disliked." Every one of these responses comes from care and concern. But over time, they can unintentionally reinforce picky eating rather than reduce it.

## So what actually helps?

The biggest shift parents can make is to step out of the power struggle around food. When eating becomes a contest of wills, children almost always dig in their heels. One evidence-based approach used worldwide focuses on restoring clear roles at mealtimes: Parents are responsible for what food is offered, when it is served and where meals take place, while children decide whether they will eat and how much.

In practice, this means parents provide balanced meals at regular times and then step back. There is no pressure, no bribing and no threats. Although this approach may feel counterintuitive at first, it works because children eat better when they feel safe, respected and in control of their own bodies.

## Make mealtimes calm, not perfect

Children do not need beautifully arranged plates or endless food variety. What they need is predictability. Regular meal times, a calm atmosphere and shared meals when possible help children feel secure. Turning off screens and keeping meals relaxed and time-limited can make a noticeable difference. If a child eats very little at one meal, staying calm is key. There will be another opportunity to eat.



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Including at least one food the child usually accepts can also reduce anxiety and give them the confidence to explore other foods at their own pace. For example, if a child enjoys fried anchovies and parents would like to introduce a new food, such as fried rice noodles, the anchovies can be served together with the rice noodles. Let the child explore the food in their own time, without pressure.

## Exposure matters more than bites

Many parents worry when their child refuses a food once and assume it will never be accepted. In reality, children often need repeated exposure, sometimes more than ten times, before they are willing to try something new. Seeing, touching, smelling or even playing with the food are all important steps toward acceptance. Eating does not start in the mouth. It starts with familiarity.

## Be the example, not the enforcer

Children learn more from what adults do than what they say. When parents avoid certain foods, skip meals or eat separately, children notice. On the other hand, when parents enjoy a variety of foods without pressure or commentary, children are more likely to follow. Using neutral language can also help. Instead of instructing a child to "eat your vegetables," parents might describe the food casually: "This is crunchy" or "I like how this tastes". These small changes can reduce resistance and encourage curiosity.

## When should parents worry?

Most picky eating is part of normal development. However, professional advice is helpful if a child eats fewer than ten foods, is not growing well (no improvement on the growth charts), frequently gags or vomits with certain textures or becomes extremely anxious during meals. Early support can make a significant difference.

## A final word for parents

Picky eating often feels personal, but it is not. A child who refuses food is not rejecting their parent's effort, cooking or care. They are simply learning how to eat at their own pace. Progress is rarely smooth or linear. That is normal. Parents do not need to fix their child; they only need to create the right environment and remain consistent. With patience and trust, even the pickiest eater can move forward, one small step at a time.



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