

# Supporting "picky" eaters

## What nursery staff need to know



Providing a wide range of good-quality food in your nursery is part of nurturing happy, healthy children. But what do you do if some children don't want to eat it?

By Jo Cormack

Jo Cormack is a doctoral researcher, qualified and registered counsellor specialising in child feeding, and author of *Helping Children Develop a Positive Relationship with Food: A Practical Guide for Early Years Professionals* (£14.99, Jessica Kingsley Publishers). For more picky eating tips, visit her website: [www.emotionallyawarefeeding.com/](http://www.emotionallyawarefeeding.com/)

**A**pproximately one in four young children is a 'picky eater' - this means that you will certainly be encountering your fair share of mealtime dramas, probably daily. I don't like the term 'picky' because it implies children are choosing to reject certain foods when they may simply find them too tricky to eat. However, it is the term used by most parents and professionals and it's widely used in academia too.

This statistic is so high, it might prompt you to ask whether picky eating is perhaps just a normal aspect of development. The short answer to this is: 'yes'. The long answer is a little more complex.



### Is picky eating normal?

Picky eating is normal in toddlerhood, in that many young children become very wary of unfamiliar foods, often in the second year of life. This is called 'neophobia' (fear of the new). Scientists have speculated that neophobia is a trick of evolution; that humans have evolved this way in order to prevent toddlers from wanting to pick and eat poisonous berries once they learn to walk. It is interesting that becoming picky often coincides with becoming mobile.

Insisting on a limited diet also fits with where toddlers are in terms of their general development: they are just beginning to learn about what they can and can't do - where the boundaries are. They are starting to explore the word "No!" and their personal power. All of this is natural and healthy; part of a child's journey as they learn about their world. However, if a child is using their eating to experiment with their autonomy, mealtimes can soon become a battleground.

### Just a phase?

According to researchers (Cardona Cano et al. 2015), nearly two thirds of children who are picky eaters at the age of three have grown out of it by the time they are six. Technically then, it is 'just a phase'. But I don't recommend seeing it that way. Here's why:

- If we dismiss picky eating, we may miss the one third of children who won't necessarily grow out of it
- There is lots we can do to improve children's relationship with food, so we should not simply wait it out
- Occasionally, picky eating is a symptom of an underlying problem, so it should not be ignored.

### Different kinds of eating challenges...

Childhood eating problems are on a spectrum. At one end, we have mild to moderate picky eating, where perhaps a child has strong ideas about what they will and won't eat, but they are still consuming a relatively varied diet. This is 100% normal in early childhood. At the other end, we have eating which is so limited it would be classed as a disorder: Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID).

ARFID is a new diagnosis and is not widely known about yet. Although ARFID only affects a small minority of children, it is important for nursery staff to know that it exists so that very limited eating is taken seriously. Of course, there is lots in between these two ends of the spectrum, too.

### A child who...

- rejects one or more entire food categories (eg. meat or vegetables)
- can only eat one or two textures (eg. just purees or just dry, crunchy foods)
- rejects foods consistently (the same every day and both at home and nursery)
- accepts less than 20 foods
- seems very anxious about eating unfamiliar or disliked foods
- gags or vomits in response to certain foods or smells

...may have a more complex problem, requiring professional support.



If you are worried about a child in your care, suggest their parent or carer arranges a visit to their health visitor or GP. Sometimes, a child might have chewing or swallowing problems, digestive problems, sensory processing problems or allergies/intolerances, to name but a few of the causes of more concerning eating problems. On the other hand, they may just cling to a small list of familiar foods because of their temperament. Children who are naturally cautious, sensitive or emotional are all more likely to be picky eaters. For some children, picky eating can be a huge issue. For others, it can be a transient stage we can help them through. Either way, nursery staff can make a real difference by embracing evidence-based good practice in relation to food.

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### Jo's top tips

I explain exactly what constitutes good practice in my book, but here are a few tips:

- **Eat with the children if you can.** The most powerful influence adults can have over children's eating is through what they model
- **Make sure your mealtime structure is appropriate.** Have you left at least two hours between each meal and snack and not more than three? I call this the 2-3 rule. (Note: Children aged five and over can manage longer gaps)
- **Consider all the children when you menu plan.** Make sure there is always at least one food at every snack and one or two foods at main meals, that are on your picky eaters' accepted-foods list. Children need to learn to trust that there will always be something they can manage. If this is not realistic, let them bring accepted foods in from home
- **Place serving dishes in the middle of the table and allow children to self-serve** if they are developmentally capable of doing so safely. This boosts children's sense of control, which lowers anxiety, while fostering social and motor skill development
- **Nurture self-regulation.** This is where children decide to eat (or not to eat) based on their body's cues. Good self-regulation guards against eating disorders and obesity. Every time we tell a child to eat 'just one more bite' we are interrupting their ability to self-regulate
- **Move away from the 'get food down child' mindset.** It is culturally normal to see our role as adults as being about getting children to eat the food we serve them. Instead we should focus on making meals relaxed and positive. It is much better to leave children to make their own eating decisions rather than offering encouragement and praise. This is in line with 'The Division of Responsibility' model (see right).



### Book giveaway!

We have three copies of *Helping Children Develop a Positive Relationship with Food: A Practical Guide for Early Years Professionals* - Jo Cormack (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) to give away. Jo explains the theory behind *The Division of Responsibility* and looks at a nursery where it is being used to great effect.

Tweet us @NDNATalk or tag us on Facebook about your thoughts on eating challenges if you want to be considered.

The **Division of Responsibility** is an approach to feeding developed by leading US feeding expert, Ellyn Satter:

*The adult decides what is going to be served, where it is going to be served and when it is going to be served. The child decides whether and how much to eat.*

This is the gold standard in terms of supporting a positive relationship with food. It can be very hard to make *The Division of Responsibility* work because all staff have to understand and embrace it. Unlearning the instinct to encourage children to eat and try foods takes a lot of effort.

### Online resources

- [www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/](http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/)
- [www.jocormack.com/](http://www.jocormack.com/)
- <https://feedingbytes.com/>
- [www.playwithfood.com.au/](http://www.playwithfood.com.au/)
- [www.childfeedingguide.co.uk/](http://www.childfeedingguide.co.uk/)
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