Dr. Sears’ Guide to Feeding Toddlers:

20 Tips for Pleasing the Picky Eater
When our first few children were toddlers, we dreaded dinnertime. We would prepare all kinds of sensible meals composed of what we thought were healthy, appealing foods. Most of these offerings would end up splattering the high-chair tray and carpeting the floor. To make matters worse, we took our kids’ rejection of our cuisine personally, sure that this was a sign of parental lapse on our part. What was wrong? Why were these kids such picky eaters?

Why toddlers are picky. Being a picky eater is part of what it means to be a toddler. We have since learned that there are developmental reasons why kids between one and three years of age peck and poke at their food. After a year of rapid growth (the average one-year-old has tripled her birth weight), toddlers gain weight more slowly. So, of course, they need less food. The fact that these little ones are always on the go also affects their eating patterns. They don’t sit still for anything, even food. Snacking their way through the day is more compatible with these busy explorers’ lifestyle than sitting down to a full-fledged feast.

Learning this helped us relax. We now realize that our job is simply to buy the right food, prepare it nutritiously (steamed rather than boiled, baked rather than fried), and serve it creatively. We leave the rest up to the kids. How much they eat, when they eat, and if they eat is mostly their responsibility; we’ve learned to take neither the credit nor the blame.

Toddlers like to binge on one food at a time. They may eat only fruits one day, and vegetables the next. Since erratic eating habits are as normal as toddler mood swings, expect your child to eat well one day and eat practically nothing the next. Toddlers from one to three years need between 1,000 and 1,300 calories a day, yet they may not eat this amount every day. Aim for a nutritionally-balanced week, not a balanced day.

All this is not to say that parents shouldn’t encourage their toddlers to eat well and develop healthy food habits. Based on our hands-on experience with eight children, we’ve developed 20 tactics to tempt little taste buds and minimize mealtime hassles.
Offer a nibble tray.

Toddlers like to graze their way through a variety of foods, so why not offer them a customized smorgasbord? The first tip from the Sears’ kitchen is to offer toddlers a nibble tray. Use an ice-cube tray, a muffin tin, or a compartmentalized dish, and put bite-size portions of colorful and nutritious foods in each section. Call these finger foods playful names that a two-year-old can appreciate, such as:

- apple moons (thinly sliced)
- avocado boats (a quarter of an avocado)
- banana wheels
- broccoli trees (steamed broccoli florets)
- carrot swords (cooked and thinly sliced)
- cheese building blocks
- egg canoes (hard-boiled egg wedges)
- little O’s (o-shaped cereal)

Place the food on an easy-to-reach table. As your toddler makes his rounds through the house, he can stop, sit down, nibble a bit, and, when he’s done, continue on his way. These foods have a table-life of an hour or two.

Dip it.

Young children think that immersing foods in a tasty dip is pure fun (and delightfully messy). Some possibilities to dip into:

- cottage cheese or tofu dip
- cream cheese
- fruit juice-sweetened preserves
- guacamole
- peanut butter, thinly spread
- pureed fruits or vegetables
- yogurt, plain or sweetened with juice concentrate

Those dips serve equally well as spreads on apple or pear slices, bell-pepper strips, rice cakes, bagels, toast, or other nutritious platforms.

Spread it.

Toddlers like spreading, or more accurately, smearing. Show them how to use a table knife to spread cheese, peanut butter onto crackers, toast, or rice cakes.

Top it.

Toddlers are into toppings. Putting nutritious, familiar favorites on top of new and less-desirable foods is a way to broaden the finicky toddler’s menu. Favorite toppings are yogurt, cream cheese, melted cheese, guacamole, tomato sauce, applesauce, and peanut butter.

NUTRITIP: Good Grazing – Good Behavior

A child’s demeanor often parallels her eating patterns. Parents often notice that a toddler’s behavior deteriorates toward the end of the morning or mid-afternoon. Notice the connection? Behavior is at its worst the longer they go without food. Grazing minimizes blood-sugar swings and lessens the resulting undesirable behavior.
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5 Drink it.
If your child would rather drink than eat, no problem. Make a nutritious fruit-and-yogurt smoothie. Smoothies are a Mommy favorite for sneaking in new grow foods. You can sneak a lot of nutritious foods into a smoothie that you wouldn’t normally be able to get your toddler to eat. After your child gets used to enjoying a certain smoothie texture, slip in a new food once or twice a week, such as spinach or tofu. Your child won’t notice the tofu is in there, since it does not change the smoothie taste very much. Go slowly with the spinach, however. It’s more detectable by color and taste. One note of caution: Avoid any drinks with raw eggs or you’ll risk salmonella poisoning.

NUTRITIP: Why smoothies are smart
Smoothies are great camouflage. Smoothies are an easy way to sneak in nutritious “grow foods” that you want your children to develop a taste for but that they won’t eat, such as veggies, tofu, flaxseed meal, flax oil, or fish oil.

Smoothies provide nourishment easily for sick kids. Smoothies are super when children are too sick to eat but are willing to drink. Since food refusals often accompany childhood illnesses, in my pediatric practice I call smoothies the sipping solution to prevent dehydration and undernourishment while a child is recovering from an illness.

Smoothies promote good digestion. Smoothies soften bowel movements and are a very effective treatment for the common condition of childhood constipation. The high fiber in the fruit and ground grains, such as wheat germ and flaxseed meal and the flaxseed oil, are some of the nature’s best laxatives.

Smoothies can shape the kids’ tastes. Smoothies are a fun way to gradually shape or reshape children’s tastes toward eating more grow foods and fewer junk foods. By adding more of one food and less of another, you can gradually reshape tastes in the right direction, often without kids even realizing it.

Dr. Bill’s best smoothie ingredients.
Use these base ingredients:
- ground flaxseeds
- fruits: blueberries, strawberries, mango, papaya, pineapple, banana, kiwi
- juice (pomegranate, carrot, veggie juice, etc.) or organic milk
- organic yogurt

Use varying amounts of the following “special add-ins”:
- cinnamon
- dates
- honey (usually the cinnamon, raisins, or dates in addition to the fruits will provide enough sweetness)
- multivitamin/multimineral protein powder
- omega-3 supplement, such as fish oil
- peanut butter
- raisins
- spinach leaves
- tofu
- wheat germ
- whey protein powder

From one mother:
“As long as we add a tablespoon of peanut butter, the kids can’t taste the broccoli and spinach we put in the smoothie. If we run out of peanut butter, it tastes really ‘green’ and the kids won’t eat it. We have found that peanut butter is the ultimate camouflage. Also, if you add lots of berries, the smoothie remains purple, even with all the veggies in it.”

6 Bite it.
Try the ‘two-bites test’. Don’t expect love at first bite. Say, “Take two bites…and you can have more if you want…or you can try it another time.” Don’t say, “if you don’t like it.” Planting negative thoughts in a child’s suspicious mind is a setup for a food refusal.

From one mother:
“We use the one-bite-for-each-year-of-age trick. For a three-year-old, that means three bites of chicken, three bites of rice, three bites of veggies.”
7 Cut it up.

How much a child will eat often depends on how you cut it. Cut sandwiches, pancakes, waffles, and pizza into various shapes using cookie cutters.

8 Package it.

Appearance is important. For something new and different, why not use your child’s own toy plates for dishing out a snack? Our kids enjoy the unexpected and fanciful when it comes to serving dishes – anything from plastic measuring cups to ice-cream cones.

You can also try the scaled-down approach. Either serve pint-size portions or, when they’re available, buy munchkin-size foodstuffs, such as mini bagels, mini quiches, chicken drummettes (the meat part of the wing), and tiny muffins.

9 Sweeten it.

Children are born with a sweet tooth (mother’s milk is very sweet). To wean them off the taste of artificial sweeteners, gradually decrease the fake sweeteners and add instead honey, guava nectar, fruit concentrates, mashed fruits (such as blueberries and strawberries), and cinnamon.

10 Become a veggie vendor.

I must have heard, “Doctor, he won’t eat his vegetables” a thousand times. Yet, the child keeps right on growing. Vegetables require some creative marketing, as they seem to be the most contested food in households with young children. How much vegetables do toddlers need? Although kids should be offered three to five servings of veggies a day, for children under five, each serving need be only a tablespoon for each year of age. In other words, a two-year-old should ideally consume two tablespoons of vegetables three to five times a day. So if you aren’t the proud parent of a veggie lover, try the following tricks:

- Plant a garden with your child. Let her help care for the plants, harvest the ripe vegetables, and wash and prepare them. She will probably be much more interested in eating what she has helped to grow.
- Slip grated or diced vegetables into favorite foods. Try adding them to rice, cottage cheese, cream cheese, guacamole, or even macaroni and cheese. Zucchini pancakes are a big hit at our house, as are carrot muffins.
- Camouflage vegetables with a favorite sauce.
- Use vegetables as finger foods and dip them in a favorite sauce or dip.
- Using a small cookie cutter, cut the vegetables into interesting shapes.
- Steam your greens. They are much more flavorful and usually sweeter than when raw.
- Make veggie art. Create colorful faces with olive-slice eyes, tomato ears, mushroom noses, bell-pepper mustaches, and any other playful features you can think of. Our eighth child, Lauren, loved to put olives on the tip of each finger. “Olive fingers” would then nibble this nutritious and nutrient-dense food off her fingertips. Zucchini pancakes make a terrific face to which you can add pea eyes, a carrot nose, and cheese hair.
- Concoct creative camouflages. There are all kinds of possible variations on the old standby “cheese in the trees” (cheese melted on steamed broccoli florets). Or, you can all enjoy the pleasure of veggies topped with peanut-butter sauce, a specialty of Asian cuisines.
11 Share it.
If your child is going through a picky-eater stage, invite over a friend who is the same age or slightly older whom you know “likes to eat.” Your child will catch on. Group feeding lets the other kids set the example.

12 Respect tiny tummies.
Keep food servings small. Wondering how much to offer? Here’s a rule of thumb – or, rather, of hand. A young child’s stomach is approximately the size of his fist. So dole out small portions at first and refill the plate when your child asks for more. This less-is-more meal plan is not only more successful with picky eaters, it also has the added benefit of stabilizing blood-sugar levels, which in turn minimizes mood swings. As most parents know, a hungry kid is generally not a happy kid.

As much as you possibly can, let your child – and his appetite – set the pace for meals. But if you want your child to eat dinner at the same time you do, try to time his snack-meals so that they are at least two hours before dinner.

13 Make it accessible.
Give your toddler shelf space. Reserve a low shelf in the refrigerator for a variety of your toddler’s favorite (nutritious) foods and drinks. Whenever she wants a snack, open the door for her and let her choose one. This tactic also enables children to eat when they are hungry, an important step in acquiring a healthy attitude about food.

14 Use sit-still strategies.
One reason why toddlers don’t like to sit still at the family table is that their feet dangle. Try sitting on a stool while eating. You naturally begin to squirm and want to get up and move around. Children are likely to sit and eat longer at a child-size table and chair where their feet touch the ground.

15 Turn meals upside down.
The distinctions between breakfast, lunch, and dinner have little meaning to a child. If your youngster insists on eating pizza in the morning or fruit and cereal in the evening, go with it – better than her not eating at all. This is not to say that you should become a short-order cook, filling lots of special requests, but why not let your toddler set the menu sometimes? Other family members will probably enjoy the novelty of waffles and hash browns for dinner.
Let them cook.
Children are more likely to eat their own creations, so, when appropriate, let your child help prepare the food. Use cookie cutters to create edible designs out of foods like cheese, bread, thin meat slices, or cooked lasagna noodles. Give your assistant such jobs as tearing and washing lettuce, scrubbing potatoes, or stirring batter. Put pancake batter in a squeeze bottle and let your child supervise as you squeeze the batter onto the hot griddle in fun shapes, such as hearts, numbers, letters, or even spell the child’s name.

Make every calorie count.
Offer your child foods that pack lots of nutrition into small doses. This is particularly important for toddlers who are often as active as rabbits, but who seem to eat like mice. Nutrient-dense foods that most children are willing to eat include:
- Avocados
- Pasta
- Broccoli
- Peanut butter
- Brown rice and other grains
- Potatoes
- Cheese
- Poultry
- Eggs
- Squash
- Fish
- Sweet potatoes
- Kidney beans
- Tofu
- Yogurt, organic

Exaggerate it.
Children love to play copycat. When offering your child a new food or one that has been previously refused, let your child see you eating it yourself. As you’re chomping on the broccoli floret, make a happy face. Smile (it’s okay to let a few greens show through your teeth) and say: “Yum, yum!” Your child is likely to want to grab a piece of broccoli from your plate and copy you.

From one mother: “We have a high chair that pulls right up to the table, with no plastic tray in front. Our daughter sat at the table with us from the time she was five and a half months. We love good food, and she seems to just copy us. I really didn’t think she would like asparagus, but my husband grilled a bunch of veggies for me, and I fed them to her as well. I feed her new stuff without flinching or indicating anything is new. We just eat and treat her like a person who has a developed palate like us.”

Count on inconsistency.
For young children, what and how much they are willing to eat may vary daily. This capriciousness is due in large part to their ambivalence about independence, and eating is an area where they can act out this confusion. So don’t be surprised if your child eats a heaping plateful of food one day and practically nothing the next, adores broccoli on Tuesday and refuses it on Thursday, wants to feed herself at one meal and be totally catered to at another. As a parent in our practice said, “The only thing consistent about toddler feeding is inconsistency.” Try to simply roll with these mood swings, and don’t take them personally.

Relax.
Sometime between her second and third birthday, you can expect your child to become set in her ideas on just about everything – including the way food is prepared. Expect food fixations. If the peanut butter must be on top of the jelly and you put the jelly on top of the peanut butter, be prepared for a protest. It’s not easy to reason with an opinionated two-year-old. Better to learn to make the sandwich the child’s way. Don’t interpret this as being stubborn. Toddlers have a mindset about the order of things in their world. Any alternative is unacceptable. This is a passing stage.