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Food jags

A food jag is when a child will only eat one food item, or a very small group of food items, meal after meal. Some other common childhood eating behaviors that can concern parents include fear of new foods and refusal to eat what is served.

Function

Children's eating habits can be a way for them to feel independent. This is part of normal development in children.

Recommendations

As a parent or caregiver, it is your role to provide healthy food and drink choices. You can also help your child develop good eating habits by setting regular meal and snack times, making mealtimes positive, and modeling healthy choices for yourself. Let your child decide how much to eat at each meal. DO NOT encourage the "clean plate club." Instead, encourage children to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full.

Children should be allowed to choose foods based on their likes and dislikes and their caloric needs. Forcing your child to eat or rewarding your child with food does not promote better eating habits. In fact, these actions can cause long-lasting behavioral problems.

If the type of food your child is requesting is nutritious and easy to prepare, continue to offer it along with a variety of other foods at each meal. In most cases, children will start eating other foods before long. Once a child is focused on a particular food, it can be very hard to substitute an alternative. DO NOT worry if your child goes without eating much at one meal. Your child will make up for it at another meal or snack. Simply keep providing nutritious foods at meals and snack times.

Things you can do to help your child try new foods include:

- Have yourself and other family members help set a good example by eating a variety of healthy foods.
- Prepare meals with different colors and textures that are pleasing to the eye.
- Start introducing new tastes, especially green vegetables, beginning at 6 months, in the form of baby food.
- Keep offering rejected foods. It can take multiple exposures before the new food is accepted.
- Never try to force a child to eat. Mealtime should not be a time of fighting. Children will eat when hungry.
- Avoid high-sugar and empty calorie snacks in between meals to allow children to build up an appetite for healthy foods.
- Make sure children are seated comfortably at mealtimes and are not distracted.

- Involving your child in cooking and food prep at an age-appropriate level may be helpful.

FEAR OF NEW FOODS

Fear of new foods is common in children, and new foods should not be forced on a child. A child may need to be offered a new food 8 to 10 times before accepting it. Continuing to offer new foods will help increase the likelihood that your child will eventually taste and maybe even like a new food.

The taste rule --"You have to at least taste each food on your plate"-- may work for some children and families. However, this approach may make a child more resistant. Children mimic adult behavior. If another family member will not eat new foods, you cannot expect your child to experiment.

Try not to label your child's eating habits. Food preferences change with time, so a child may grow to like a food previously rejected. It may seem like a waste of food at first, but over the long run, a child who accepts a large variety of food makes meal planning and preparation easier.

REFUSING TO EAT WHAT IS SERVED

Refusing to eat what is served can be a powerful way for children to control the actions of other family members. Some parents go to great lengths to ensure that food intake is adequate. Healthy children will eat enough if offered a variety of nutritious foods. Your child may eat very little at one meal and make up for it at another meal or snack.

SNACKS

Providing scheduled meals and snack times is important for children. Kids need a lot of energy, which makes snacks an important part of their daily food intake. However, snacks do not mean treats. Fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products should be at the top of your snack list. Some snack ideas include frozen fruit pops, milk, vegetable sticks, fruit wedges, mixed dry cereal, pretzels, melted cheese on a whole-wheat tortilla, or a small sandwich.

Allowing your child to be in control of food intake may seem hard at first. However, it will help promote healthy eating habits for a lifetime.

Alternative Names

Refusal to eat; Fear of new foods

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