


FOOD



Mealtimes at the Wolters household usually play like a Roger Ebert segment. Unfortunately, most of the fare receives a hearty thumbs-down from 3-year-old Dylan, resident food critic. "If the food I serve is green or brown, he won't even touch it," says his mom, Robyn, of Charleston, South Carolina. "Of course, if it's chocolate pudding or a brownie, that's a different story." But sometimes even the most tempting treat doesn't lure him to the dinner table. "There are days when he's not even remotely interested in food; he'll even turn his nose up at candy," Wolters laments.

If you're the parent of a toddler, you probably have a similar frustrating story to tell. For most parents, the situation quickly turns from annoying to worrisome; after all, if your child eats nothing but a spoonful of macaroni and cheese for an entire day, how can he possibly get the nutrients he needs to grow? Fortunately, there's little cause for concern—and lots of tricks and treats you can employ to get your finicky eater to step up to his plate, if not clean it!

"Yucky, Mommy!"

Mere months ago, your baby would put just about anything in his mouth. Then he became a toddler, and

HERE'S HOW TO GET EVEN THE PICKIEST EATER TO GIVE PEAS A CHANCE.

FIGHTS

BY MARCY LOVITCH / PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA FARWELL

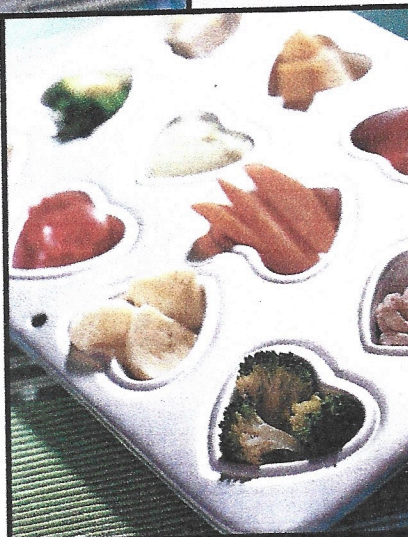
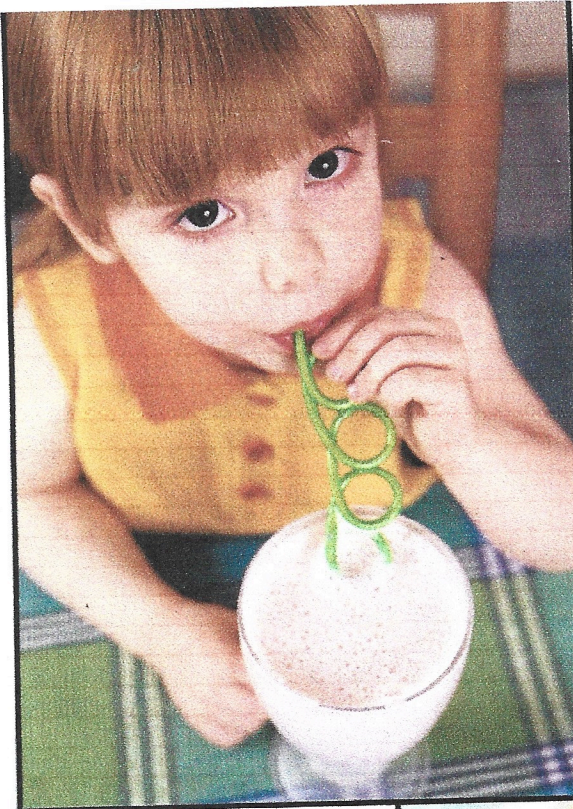
suddenly all bets are off. Don't worry, say experts. It's quite normal for toddlers to go through a finicky-eating phase, for emotional, developmental, and physical reasons, according to psychologist Sal Severe, PhD, author of *How to Behave So Your Preschooler Will, Too!* (Viking, 2002). Not surprisingly, "ninety-five percent of picky eaters are between the ages of two and four," he says.

You know that little children thrive on routine and are sometimes fearful of new people or experiences. The same holds true for food, says Will Wilkoff, MD, a pediatrician in Brunswick, Maine, and author of *Coping with a Picky Eater* (Simon & Schuster, 1998). "All of those new tastes, textures, and smells can be overwhelming to a toddler, so he's less likely to try an unfamiliar food," Dr. Wilkoff says.

Refusing food is also a toddler's way of declaring her independence. As your child becomes mobile and reaches more developmental milestones, she gains a sense of her own capabilities and starts to have more of an opinion about what she wants to do and where she wants to go. "It's a common power struggle

forget what a busy schedule your toddler has. Who has the time to squeeze in a turkey sandwich when there are so many fun toys to play with?

But your child isn't turning up his nose at food just because he's developing into a person with a mind of his own.



TRICKS AND TREATS

Unfortunately, simply offering a child food and hoping he eats it sometimes doesn't cut it. For tough cases, you're going to need some creative tactics.

- **Make food fun.** The same old sandwich is a lot more appetizing to a toddler when it's shaped like a dinosaur. Stock up on cookie cutters (and muffin tins) and you'll see more of that lunch disappear.
- **Let kids help.** Even a toddler can sprinkle grated carrots on a salad. Little kids love to help and are more likely to try food they've had a hand in preparing.
- **Compromise.** If your kid is clamoring for sugared cereal, mix some in with Cheerios or another healthy option. A little sugar won't hurt if you monitor it.
- **Be sneaky.** A brownie made with applesauce instead of oil is just as sweet

and a lot more nutritious than its fatty counterpart.

- **Mix and match.** Don't get hung up on what foods "go" together. Go ahead and put those berries next to that potato. A variety of colors and textures may make help make healthy food palatable to your picky toddler.

IF YOU WANT THOSE VEGGIES TO DISAPPEAR, YOU'LL NEED TO GET CREATIVE.

between children and their parents—kids at this age are testing the limits of their influence on the world around them, and the dinner table is no exception," says Loraine Stern, MD, an associate clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of California Los Angeles.

Such food fights are also a way for a toddler to observe cause and effect, another favorite tot pastime. Indeed, there's nothing more satisfying to a toddler than seeing what his parents will do when he asserts his will. And let's not

In fact, physiological issues play an equally strong role. First and foremost, your little one isn't a baby anymore. "Babies need to consume more calories per pound because they're growing at a tremendous pace. The amount of food they need to grow is huge relative to their size," says Dr. Stern. "One-to-three-year-olds grow more slowly. In fact, there are weeks when they don't grow at all." A toddler's appetite will vary according to that particular growth period—sometimes she'll be hungrier

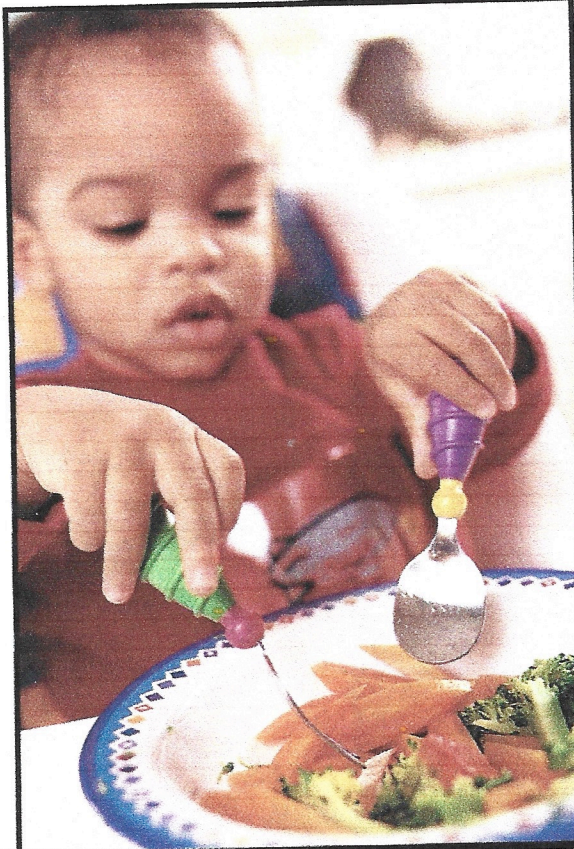
and need more food than at other times. And since a toddler's stomach is small, she doesn't need much food to feel satisfied.

So What Should My Toddler Be Eating?

Nutritionally, children between the ages of 2 and 6 need the following daily servings from each group: two each of milk, fruit, and meat; three vegetable; and six grain, according the United States Department of Agriculture. However, a

toddler-size portion is very different from what you would feed an older child or an adult. A good rule of thumb for a toddler's portion is one third or one fourth of an adult's, or roughly the size of your child's fist.

That doesn't mean, however, that you should worry every time your little fussbudget leaves the table with his plate half full. "Offer three healthy meals and two small snacks a day," says Bridget Swinney, RD, a nutritionist in El Paso, Texas, and author of *Healthy Food for Healthy Kids* (Meadowbrook, 1999). If he doesn't eat much, don't sweat it. "Children are the best



FIVE FOOLPROOF TODDLER TREATS

- 1. Pumpkin bread** This easy-to-make quick bread is moist, sweet, and packed with vitamin A.
- 2. Pita pizzas** The cheese is full of calcium, and the sauce has vitamin C and the antioxidant lycopene.
- 3. Banana splits** Go heavy on the bananas and strawberries and use some healthful frozen yogurt for a snack full of potassium, fiber, vitamin C, calcium, and protein.
- 4. Baked apples** Honey, cinnamon, and brown sugar make this healthy dish—packed with fiber and nutrients—a treat for kids and adults.
- 5. Veggie cheeseburgers** Teeming with a variety of vegetables, grains, and soy, these healthy burgers are faux fast food.

CHILDREN ARE USUALLY THE BEST JUDGES OF HOW MUCH FOOD THEY NEED.

judges of how much food they can fit in their small tummies. Your toddler will eat when he's hungry and stop when he's full," says Swinney.

Instead of focusing on how much your child eats, concentrate on offering a wide variety of healthy foods. "Many fussy children eat the same collection of foods every day, such as chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese," Swinney adds. To broaden your child's limited repertoire and pack more vitamins, minerals, and fiber into his diet, offer small portions of new foods alongside old favorites. Initially your child may ignore these strange new dishes, but keep trying. Studies show that if you offer a food to a toddler ten times, eventually he'll try it.

Beverages are important, too, especially whole milk and water. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that your toddler drink two to three glasses of milk a day, but moderate the amount of other liquids,

such as juices and soft drinks, between meals. "Kids often overdrink, and when there's lots of liquid in their stomach, they don't eat," says Dr. Wilkoff.

But what if your little one vetoes the meal du jour? Resist the urge to bribe him. No matter how tempting it is to coax in a few carrots with a cupcake, these kinds of negotiations teach your child that some foods are more desirable than others and that food is about power struggles rather than nutrition.

To avoid this trap, Dr. Stern suggests allowing dessert to be part of the meal. Putting a lowfat pudding cup alongside the veggies takes dessert down a few pegs and makes it less of a temptation.

Setting the Table for Mealtime Success

Now that you know what your toddler should be eating, you're probably curious as to how to get him to eat it. Setting a good example at the dinner table is your first step. Arrange mealtimes

so you can sit together as a family for at least one meal a day. Kids are more likely to try different foods if everyone else is eating them. The flip side of this? You're all going to have to eat more kidlike foods. "Family meals are compromises," says Dr. Wilkoff. "Although your diet may become more bland, it's important for your kids to see that you're all eating the same healthy foods."

However, once you get your toddler to the table, remember that he may not stay there long. A young child doesn't have the attention span to sit through a long meal. When he's finished with his food, let him leave the table to play with some quiet toys in your dining area or kitchen while you finish eating.

Finally, remember that no matter how finicky your child seems, he won't be this way forever—and he certainly won't starve to death! *

Marcy Lovitch is a freelance writer in Brooklyn.