

## Improve Your Child's Eating Habits

If you are the parent of a young child, chances are you have dealt with picky eating at some point. Maybe your child only likes one type of food or refuses to eat at dinner time – whatever the case might be, getting your child on a healthy eating track can seem daunting at times. But when does picky eating become a concern?

A well-balanced diet is crucial for one's overall health – especially during their childhood years when they are still growing and developing. Dr. Safiat Amuwo, an OSF HealthCare pediatrician, says healthy eating habits start at home.

"A lot of times, children learn from their parents. So if the parents are picky eaters, or don't eat a lot of fruits or vegetables, they mimic what they see their parents do. If you are eating fried foods or foods with high sugar, the child wants to eat that, too. It is always good to make sure that whatever you are giving the child, you also eat it," Dr. Amuwo says.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), children need to incorporate some essential nutrients like dietary fiber, vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium in their diets, but many do not get the recommended amounts. On the other hand, nutrients that should be limited include sugars, sodium, and saturated fat.

Fruits and vegetables are important for kids, and they contain many of these essential nutrients. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), kids should get around one to two cups of fruit and one to two and a half cups of vegetables per day, depending on their age. However, many parents tend to struggle with getting their child to eat their fruits and veggies.

"Cutting up fruits is much more appetizing than giving a child a whole fruit. Say, for instance, if you ask a child to eat a whole apple, they are less likely to eat it. But if you cut the apple up, they are more likely to eat it," explains Dr. Amuwo.

When it comes to fruit juices, Dr. Amuwo says sticking to 100% juice is important as it does not contain those unwanted added sugars – but to limit juices and stick to whole fruits as often as possible. Ideally, water is the best beverage for your child to consume as it is not filled with sugars and keeps your child hydrated.

Vegetables are the other important food group that many kids love to hate. If your child is one who tends to avoid the veggies on their dinner plate, Dr. Amuwo recommends sneaking them in other ways.

"If they don't like certain vegetables like spinach or greens, you can always mix those up with other vegetables in a blender and sort of incorporate that in your pasta. So if you're making pasta and the sauce is red, you can add some spinach – a lot of times spinach doesn't have a taste. Spinach can almost go with anything," Dr. Amuwo advises.

It is also important to optimize your child's bone health, especially since their bodies and bones are continuing to grow and develop. You may even recall the "Got Milk?" ads that grew especially popular in the early 1990s. While your child does not necessarily need to be consuming milk by the gallon, the USDA does recommend children get about two to two and a half cups of dairy per day, as it is a good source of essential vitamins and minerals but also aids in bone growth.

"We ask parents to provide a certain amount of milk because that gives us calcium and vitamin D. However, there are other places you can get calcium and vitamin D. You can do almond milk if it has those nutrients in it. You can have yogurt or cheese. So even if your child doesn't want milk, you can still incorporate those other foods that do have calcium and vitamin D," says Dr. Amuwo.

Perhaps your child is not necessarily a picky eater, but he or she may not enjoy sitting down for meal time. Even if your child is getting in some key nutrients throughout the day, a full, well-balanced meal is important as it is a good way to get a high amount of those essential nutrients at one time.

If your child picks at their dinner plate, or is always on the go when snacking, Dr. Amuwo says turning these times into a more mindful experience may help engage your child a bit more – and may help improve their eating habits in the long run.

"If we can have those snacks and meal times at a table and with the TV off, it can help with children wanting to eat their food and not be distracted," Dr. Amuwo explains.

Most importantly, make healthy eating fun – and perhaps even bring your child along to the grocery store when shopping or let them watch you make dinner, as engaging them may make them more excited and eager to eat when meal time comes around.

If your child is a picky eater, or you are worried your child is not getting the proper nutrients throughout their day, make an appointment with their pediatrician to discuss your concerns and come up with a plan.