



Is My Child a Picky Eater or a Problem Feeder?

Understanding the Difference

Many toddlers go through phases of picky eating—but sometimes feeding challenges go beyond typical behavior. Knowing the difference can help you decide when to seek additional support.

Typical Picky Eater

Most children experience some picky eating between **18 months and 5 years** as part of normal development.

Your child may:

- ✓ Eat **30 or more foods**, even if they have favorites.
- ✓ Accept foods from most food groups.
- ✓ Occasionally refuse a favorite food, then eat it again later.
- ✓ Be willing to touch, smell, lick, or taste new foods—even if they don't eat them.
- ✓ Eat different foods at home, daycare, or restaurants.
- ✓ Continue to grow and gain weight appropriately.
- ✓ Have food preferences that change from week to week.

Good news: Picky eating often improves with patience, repeated exposure, and positive mealtime routines.

Problem Feeder

Problem feeding is more than simply being selective. It often interferes with nutrition, growth, family routines, or participation in everyday meals.

Your child may:

- ⚠ Eat **fewer than 20 foods**.
- ⚠ Regularly eliminate foods from their diet without replacing them.
- ⚠ Refuse entire food groups (fruits, vegetables, proteins, etc.).
- ⚠ Becomes upset when new foods are offered.
- ⚠ Gagging, choking, coughing, or vomiting during meals.
- ⚠ Eat only foods with certain textures, brands, temperatures, or colors.
- ⚠ Require distractions (screens, toys) to eat.
- ⚠ Take longer than **30–45 minutes** to finish meals.
- ⚠ Experience poor weight gain or nutritional concerns.
- ⚠ Cause mealtimes to become stressful for the whole family.

Red Flags That Warrant an Evaluation

Consider speaking with your pediatrician or a pediatric feeding specialist if your child:

- Frequently coughs, chokes, or gags while eating.
- Refuses most new foods for several months.
- Eats fewer than 20 different foods.
- Eliminates foods without adding new ones.
- Has difficulty chewing or swallowing.
- Avoids certain textures entirely.
- Has pain during meals.
- Shows significant anxiety or fear around eating.
- Has poor growth or weight concerns.
- Has a history of prematurity, reflux, food allergies, oral motor difficulties, autism, Down syndrome, or other developmental differences.

Did You Know?

Research shows that children may need to be exposed to a new food **10–20 times—or even more—before willingly accepting it**. Exposure can include looking at, touching, smelling, helping prepare, or tasting the food. Progress often happens in small steps.

What Parents Can Do

DO:

- ✓ Keep meals calm and positive.
- ✓ Offer a variety of foods without pressure.
- ✓ Continue serving familiar foods alongside new ones.
- ✓ Eat together whenever possible.
- ✓ You control what foods are offered; let your child decide **whether** and **how much** to eat from what's offered.
- ✓ Celebrate small successes.

AVOID:

- ✗ Forcing bites.
 - ✗ Bribing with desserts or rewards.
 - ✗ Preparing multiple separate meals.
 - ✗ Pressuring your child to "clean the plate."
 - ✗ Giving up after only one or two exposures to a new food.
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When to Seek Help

If mealtimes have become a daily struggle or you're worried about your child's eating, you don't have to navigate it alone.

Early support can help children:

- Expand the variety of foods they eat.
 - Develop safe chewing and swallowing skills.
 - Build confidence with new foods.
 - Reduce family stress around mealtimes.
 - Create positive lifelong eating habits.
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1st Foundations Pediatric Therapy: Helping children build strong foundations for lifelong success through compassionate, evidence-based virtual feeding therapy. Serving families across Virginia and North Carolina.

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