

## Help! Our Two-Year-Old Won't Eat People Food

This answer comes from Beth Johnson

**Q.** Our two-year-old son, Adam, refuses to eat real meals like the rest of the family no matter how we present it to him. We have cut him off all baby food, although we still give him pablum for breakfast. He is drinking more milk than usual and otherwise his diet is limited to snack foods like yogurt, cheese, bananas, fruits and berries, and any kind of junk food that is available. When we give him a little normal food, just on his lips so he can taste it, he goes into a big gag reflex. Our doctor is concerned that he isn't getting enough good protein and that he is developing fussy eating habits. What can we do?

**A.** Your doctor has a point. Picky eating often does begin when children are about two years old. Children go through a series of growth spurts and plateaus with accompanying changes in appetite. When the two-year-old doesn't seem to be eating enough to keep him alive, the concerned parents may engage in various behaviors to get the child to eat – coaxing, nagging, begging, playing games, or offering special foods. All of this gets the child a lot of undue attention which can quickly escalate into a power struggle. Two-year-olds are discovering ways to assert their independence and can quickly become skilled at power struggles. It sounds as if you are at that point with Adam. He is used to baby foods which are easy to swallow, or finger food which are easy for him to eat. He maybe feeling robbed of his independence when you offer him more challenging foods.

You are not alone in facing eating issues with young children.

The key is to step out of the power struggle – easy to say – challenging to do! Step one, is to recognize that you cannot **make** him eat anything he refuses. You will need to make a concerted effort to be unconcerned about Adam's eating. Include him at the family table, and offer him small amounts of what everyone else is eating.

If he chooses not to eat, ignore it and keep the conversation light and friendly. **Above all, do not become a short-order cook!**

You're afraid he'll become malnourished? Rest assured, small children do not starve when a variety of good food is made available **and attention is diverted from the issue**. If he eats only one of the items on the table, don't worry. He can get the necessary variety over a number of days. If he doesn't eat at mealtime and is hungry as soon as the meal is cleared away, you might put his plate into the fridge and offer it to him then. Otherwise, **he will survive** until the next meal or regular snack time. You will need to ignore any ensuing tantrums. Remove him from the room if his behavior becomes too disruptive. Invite him to come back when he is ready to participate peacefully.

You might offer him a regular **small** between-meal snack of healthy foods. (My grandchildren loved frozen peas, corn, and berries which are nourishing and they are soothing to swollen gums.) Healthy snacks can take care of nutritional needs and save you from the negative results of the child's low-blood sugar. Don't have junk food in the house on a regular basis; save it for special occasions only.

This plan requires the cooperation of both parents and any older children. It is likely to be stressful at first, but hang in there! It is worth the effort. You'll eventually be able to enjoy happy mealtimes, with healthy kids.

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