



Dr. David Butler is a pediatrician with Physicians' Primary Care of Southwest Florida in the south Fort Myers and Lehigh Acres offices. ppcswfl.com

ask the expert »
DR. DAVID BUTLER



How to get a picky eater to eat

Q: My child is a picky eater.
What can I do to get my child to eat healthy food?

A People are intrigued by this question, because many have encountered a child fitting this description. Maybe you have a child who plays this role. Perhaps you are one of the parents I see who has pleaded, begged, bribed or bargained with your child to eat the food you have prepared. You might have even made airplane or train sounds trying to get one bite of food into your child's mouth. I have been there as a parent, and I see many of you in the same predicament every day.

Several manufacturers make supplemental drinks targeted to picky eaters. The advertising for these products is loaded with buzz words like "healthy" and "balanced diet." I frequently use these drinks in my practice. However, I only recommend them for specific patients. It is anecdotal evidence, but most picky eaters I see have an appropriate height and weight for their age even though they have a horrible diet. These are not the children who will benefit

from the supplemental drinks.

Most of these supplements contain greater than 250 calories per 8 ounces. This is a huge excess of calories for a child with an already appropriate weight. These children need better foods instead of more calories.

Some parents are using these drinks as meal replacements for their children. This has the potential to make your child a "pickier" eater. These drinks are heavily sweetened and sometimes contain large amounts of sugar. By giving these supplements, we are giving in to our children with something sweet. They also lack important things a growing body needs from a well-balanced diet, such as fiber. Furthermore, these drinks are not marketed as meal replacements. The manufacturers state in their advertising they should not be used as meal replacements.

What does a pediatrician and father of a picky eater ultimately recommend? First, patience. It can take several tries for a child to develop a taste for some

foods.

Second, get your child involved. Make meals fun! Get your children to help prepare meals. Create your own food pyramid and let them make selections from each category to create a meal. Take your child to the grocery store and have them help you shop. Let them see the foods and how they are prepared. Include your child in meal preparation and serving the food.

If you are going to reward your child's eating habits, don't reward with candy. Reward with healthy things like going to the park or a trip to a museum. These not only give your child a good example but teach them how to make healthy choices as they get older.

Also, don't be afraid to consult your pediatrician, especially if you have concerns about weight or if your child is experiencing gastrointestinal symptoms.

A picky eater is a challenge, but you are not alone. Remember, the habits you teach your child today influence their choices tomorrow. **p.c.**

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