

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## The Problem Eater

Have you reached the point where you have taken every precaution and have done everything you thought was right and still find that your preschooler won't eat? It happens to most parents at one time or another.

### He Ate Well Until He Was Two

Confusion over eating "well" with eating "less" is frequently the basis for concern. As a child approaches his second year, he is growing at a slower rate and as a result does not require as much food.

When a preschooler first begins eating less, a parent's natural reaction is to coax. Worried, you try to force the child: "No leaving the table until you've eaten those carrots." Or you try bribery: "You can have a cookie if you eat your broccoli."

But these pressure tactics usually backfire. Studies have shown that kids who are prodded and nagged about eating, actually eat less. And, if you reward them with one food to eat another--say, cookies for eating broccoli--chances are they'll favor the cookies and won't touch the broccoli on their own.

The best solution to finicky eating is to ease off the nagging, offer well-balanced meals and snacks, and let the child decide how much to eat. Your job as a parent is to prepare regular, nutritious meals, make sure your child gets to the

table and is not distracted at mealtime. Children have a built-in sense of how much food they need. If they are not pressured and are not ill, they set their own pace.

**FOOD SHOULD NEVER BE USED  
AS A MEDIUM  
FOR BARGAINING OR DISCIPLINE.**

Remain calm and don't force feed. The child will not starve. If you are concerned about growth or health, have your child examined by a doctor.

### Try a Low-Key Approach

- ☞ Don't be surprised if your children turn up their noses when they first encounter spinach or string beans. Children are naturally suspicious of new foods. With time and repeated exposure, the new food may become preferred. When you cook vegetables for yourself, set a few out for the children and be patient.
- ☞ Don't overreact if your child refuses certain foods. The worst thing you could do is make an issue out of your child's aversion to tomatoes. Shaming the child will make trying the food more emotionally charged in the future. Just offer all foods in a neutral manner and let your child approach them on his own.

- ⇒ If your child refuses some foods, substitute others that have the same nutrients. Dark green vegetables are an important source of vitamins A and C. That's why we worry when young children don't get enough of them. But some fruits also contain these nutrients. So while you're waiting for your youngster to warm up to spinach, fruits and other vegetables like carrots can take their place. Apricots and cantaloupe are just as rich in vitamin A as spinach. And, vitamin A is also found in nectarines, purple plums, peaches and watermelon. Oranges, grapefruit, tomatoes, potatoes and peppers have as much vitamin C as broccoli and cauliflower.
- ⇒ Don't play short-order cook for your child. You have the meal on the table, the child whines that he doesn't like it, you insist he eat it, he refuses, and you say, "All right, what will you eat?" That is short-order cooking. Ignore the complaining and whining. Don't show concern. Have his milk and bread on the table so he won't starve. Let the child pick and choose from the variety of foods on the table.
- ⇒ Think about how much you want to cater to food likes and dislikes. In planning meals for your family, you will probably want to treat your child just like you do everyone else--by catering to a reasonable degree to her food preferences. But don't limit your menus to just the foods that you know your child will like. One good strategy is to include one food she likes with each meal.
- ⇒ A food "jag" occurs when a child will want to eat only a certain food or combination of foods. When your child goes on a temporary food "jag," try not to make an issue of it. Or offer the food at snack time rather than serving it at mealtime.
- ⇒ Help your child get ready to eat. At times, children will get so tired or stimulated from play that they don't feel like eating. If possible, reading a book or doing a quiet activity just before eating may help the child get ready to eat. At other time the child may get so involved in their play that they don't want to come to the table. A five minute warning may help. Sometimes your child will tell you he's not hungry. Tell him that is his choice, but that you expect him to come to the table whether he eats or not and that you expect him to stay awhile. Let your child know you enjoy her company at meal time.
- ⇒ Use a child-sized plate and utensils. A smaller plate helps you offer kid-size portions. Junior-sized silverware and a glass with a broad base help the child eat independently.
- ⇒ Give your young child silverware, but don't insist on its use. If preschoolers are allowed to look, feel, mash, and smell while exploring new foods, they are more likely to accept it. You'll be able to tell if he is exploring a new food, or just playing and messing around to get you to react. Once the child stops eating, it's time to excuse her from the table.
- ⇒ Make mealtime pleasant. Try not to argue, fight, or scold at mealtime. Take time to eat and chat with your child at mealtime. Welcome your children to the table and include them in the conversation.

*Source:*

*Adapted from Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense by Ellyn Satter. 1983.*