RSAC Tips: Picky Eaters

Many children with autism have specific food preferences, whether it's a certain shape, texture, or even color. If your child is a picky eater, some of the tips below may help make mealtimes more enjoyable for everyone.

Meet Your Child Where They Are

With picky eating, gradual changes often work better than big changes. Start off with foods that your child eats regularly (or, in some cases, in situations in which your child eats regularly), and then gradually transition to more preferred foods or environments.

Mix It Up

Alternate bites of food, so that only every fourth or fifth bite of food is the food that they don't like. For example, you might offer your child 3 bites of mac and cheese in a row, followed by a bite of broccoli, then back to bites of mac and cheese.

Avoid the Battle

Don't make a big deal out of mealtime failures. If your child refuses to eat a particular meal or complains loudly about not liking a new food, just brush it off. We all have foods that we do and don't like! The important thing to remember is that we don't want your child to associate having mealtime problem behaviors with lots of adult attention or coaxing.

Make It Fun and Rewarding!

Make sure you provide lots of praise to your child for trying a new food. The more practice that your child gets with trying new foods, the more it will become part of their daily life.

When to Get More Help:

These tips are for children who eat enough calories and variety of foods to meet their nutritional requirements. If you have medical concerns regarding your child's diet, please speak to your child's pediatrician or other medical provider.

Other times that you may want to consult your child's medical providers include:

- If your child frequently refuses entire meals
- If your child only eats food of very soft textures
- If you have any concerns about chewing, swallowing, or gagging

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