

Don't Be Scared of Picky Eating



Food

Trying to move your selective eaters away from boxed chicken nuggets? Our homemade version could be a step in the right direction!



Fun

Play a round of "How Many Hands?" to help young diners connect with the foods you serve.



Conversation

Focus on something fun with these conversation starters about "It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown!"



Over the years, we've talked to thousands of families about their biggest family dinner challenges. While no two families are exactly alike, some common themes have emerged, and one of the top five challenges that adds stress to the dinner table is definitely picky eating.

"All they want to eat is pizza, mac and cheese or grilled cheese," laments one parent, while another adds "The picky eating is a constant challenge." Trying to figure out how to please all the palates in the household can lead to extra work in planning, shopping and cooking, tension at the table as parents try to encourage kids to try new foods, or even a total breakdown of the family dinner experience. Some parents we've met have abandoned trying to gather everyone for a meal altogether, so exhausted and frustrated by picky eating habits that they let everyone eat what they want, when they want it.

It's understandable that picky eating can scare families away from the table. Few things are as frustrating for parents as putting effort and energy into cooking a nutritious meal, only to have family members turn up their noses. And a [recent study](#) found that when parents try to coerce kids to eat what they're served despite individual preferences, the resulting tension can actually damage the parent-child relationship. But that doesn't have to mean resigning yourselves to serving up an endless parade of chicken nuggets, or avoiding family dinners altogether to keep the conflict at bay.

Here are our top tips for keeping conflict off the menu, and getting a wider variety of foods onto it, while dealing with picky eating:

1. Rule out underlying issues.

In rare cases, what parents think of as "picky eating" can actually signal a more serious concern. If your child's diet is extremely restrictive, they're not gaining weight at an appropriate rate or they appear to have unusually heightened emotional and physical reactions to foods, it's a good idea to consult with your family doctor.

2. Ignore what they eat.

Think about it: How comfortable would you be eating with someone looking over your shoulder, constantly commenting on how much you'd eaten, what you were and weren't eating, and what they wanted you to eat next? While it's tempting to comment on kids' eating habits and try to encourage them to try everything on the plate, your well-intentioned enthusiasm can feel very much like pressure to a child who's reluctant to eat. Instead, focus the conversation on non-food topics and try to lighten up so the table is a fun and enjoyable place to be.

3. Be a good role model.

Make a habit of serving a wide variety of healthy foods, and showing kids how you eat and enjoy those foods yourselves. It's hard to cajole a six-year-old into eating peas if you don't ever put them on your own plate. Over time, most kids will start to branch out into trying new items as they become familiar with seeing them as a normal part of your family's diet.

4. Serve preferred foods alongside new ones.

Some families make sure that there's at least one preferred food on the table every night, such as fruit, bread or noodles; some save favorites for occasions when they're planning to introduce a new item and want to be sure that there's something for tentative eaters to enjoy. Either way, the old "eat it or starve" method isn't necessarily the best approach for every family when bringing a new food to the table. You'll likely get less pushback from kids, and have a more peaceful dinnertime, if you round out the offerings on the table with a basket of bread or a plate of cheese and fruit so no one feels pressured to choose between eating a food they don't want and leaving the table hungry.

For more in-depth advice on dealing with picky eating, see [*Taking a Leap: Helping Selective Eaters Try New Foods*](#) or [*That's Disgusting! — Encouraging Picky Eaters*](#).

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE KAHN FAMILY



Meet the Khans! Emma and Zed are tackling dinnertime with toddlers at their home in the UK.

The Family:

Emma and Zed, Zak (age 4) and Aniya (age 2). The family live in Whitby, North Yorkshire, UK.

The Goal:

As with most families we've met who are mastering a dinnertime routine with young children, Emma and Zed are keeping their goals simple and realistic. Currently they're trying to work with Zak and Aniya to stay at the table rather than getting up and down while eating, a common challenge faced by many parents of young diners.

The Challenge:

Adding to the mix of dinnertime difficulties is another common issue for young families: selective eating. Zak and Aniya are still developing healthy eating habits and, at 4 and 2 years old, are exactly in the age range when most picky eating occurs. Emma says that it can be challenging to support the kids in “eating good, healthy meals without complaining.” It’s another reason to work on keeping them in their seats, but as many parents can relate, keeping little ones happily at the table is even more difficult when they’re not always thrilled with the foods being served.

The Strategies:

The top strategy for Emma and Zed can be summed up as “distraction.” “The games and tips from The Family Dinner Project have really helped,” they say, adding that they use table games to encourage Zak and Aniya to stay seated during meals. Conversation starters and fun activities help to distract the kids from focusing on the food, and limit the complaining as they’re more interested in engaging with their parents than starting a battle over what’s on their plates.

In addition to incorporating fun and conversation into each meal together, Emma and Zed have extended the fun on Sundays to make mealtime even more enticing for Zak and Aniya. During Sunday dinners, the family focuses on having a “family meeting” devoted to praising, complimenting and thanking one another. Then once the meal is over, they stay together for a 30 minute “Family Fun Time” during which they enjoy an activity chosen by the children. Recently they engaged in a

Play-Dough sculpture contest, with 2-year-old Aniya acting as judge while Zak, Emma and Zed competed to make different types of sculptures. (We hear Zed won every round.)

The Food:

While Emma and Zed serve a variety of foods to the family throughout the week, on Sundays they all enjoy a full roast dinner together. That meal tends to be a favorite, probably in part because of all the hard work they put into making the experience fun and special for the kids.

The Takeaway:

Through The Family Dinner Project, Emma says she and Zed have learned more about the importance of family meals and have gained plenty of conversation starter ideas to use with the children. “(The Family Dinner Project is) a wonderful resource that is really adding to our already close knit family life.”

The Best Part:

Simply put, “We’re all eating together and chatting and spending time together.”

Do you have your own family dinner project to share with us? We’d love to hear from you and consider featuring your family! [Contact Us](#).



PARMESAN-CRUSTED CHICKEN TENDERS



This recipe and the accompanying photo comes from the Hy-Vee dietitian team and originally appeared on their website. Check out Hy-Vee's website for more recipes and information.



Parmesan-Crusted Chicken Tenders

Serves 4

Ingredients:

Canola Oil

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

2 large eggs

1/2 cup Parmesan cheese, finely shredded

1 cup Panko whole-wheat bread crumbs

1 lb. fresh chicken tenders

1 Tbsp. Italian seasoning

1 tsp. garlic powder

1/4 tsp. salt

1 cup marinara sauce, heated

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

2. Place a wire rack on a large baking sheet and coat with cooking spray.

3. Place flour in a shallow dish. Lightly beat eggs in another shallow dish. Combine Parmesan and breadcrumbs in a third shallow dish.

4. Toss tenders with Italian seasoning, garlic powder and salt in a medium bowl. Coat each tender in flour, shaking off any excess. Dip in egg and let any excess drip off. Then roll in the breadcrumb mixture. Place the tenders on the prepared rack. Generously coat the top of each tender with cooking spray.

5. Bake for 10 minutes. Turn each tender over and coat with cooking spray. Continue baking until the outside is crisp and tenders are cooked through, about 10 minutes more. Serve the tenders with marinara sauce for dipping.



Choose a food on your plate and count how many steps were involved in getting it to your table. For example, “rewinding” your glass of milk’s journey might look like this: table, kitchen, grocery store, truck, distribution site, really big truck, farm, cow. If someone gets stuck, go around and see if anyone can think of more steps. How far back can you go?

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/how-many-hands/>



This October marks the 52nd anniversary of “It’s The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown,” an iconic Halloween television special that has been a staple of the season in American homes since its first broadcast. Lighthearted news reports are starting to surface, detailing various celebrations of the occasion — including a series of Peanuts-themed corn mazes across the country.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/conversation-of-the-week/the-great-pumpkin/>

As with most classics, the staying power of “The Great Pumpkin” has much to do with the accessibility and timeless quality of its story. However, “Peanuts” creator Charles Schulz also managed to pack a lot of wisdom and universally teachable moments into his Halloween special. Try re-watching “The Great Pumpkin” as a family (or watching for the first time!), then discuss it over dinner:



TALK ABOUT: THE GREAT PUMPKIN

- The story of “The Great Pumpkin” centers on Linus, who firmly believes in The Great Pumpkin even though everyone else makes fun of him for it. Have you ever stuck to a belief or an opinion, even when others have tried to talk you out of it?
- Lucy tells Charlie Brown that his invitation to the Halloween party must have been a mistake, because “there were two lists: One to invite, and one not to invite.” What do you think about Lucy’s behavior? If you were hosting a Halloween party, who would be on the guest list? Do you think it’s ever okay to leave someone off the list, and if so, how would you handle it?
- Sally gives up trick-or-treating to stay in the pumpkin patch with Linus. Have you ever changed your plans to make someone else happy? Were you happy with your decision, or not? Why?
- Snoopy spends much of “The Great Pumpkin” imagining that he’s the World War I Flying Ace. If you could imagine yourself as any historical hero, who would you choose and why?
- Linus says, “There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people: Religion, politics, and The Great Pumpkin.” Why do you think he feels this way? Do you think there are certain topics that shouldn’t be discussed? Does it depend on who you’re talking to or where you are?

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