

5 Advantages of Having a Picky Eater

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Have you ever noticed that books, articles and well-meaning friends and family seem to be on a crusade to fix picky eating? We know the advice all too well. Have them take a bite, serve one meal and get kids growing and cooking their own food. And there's always the if-you-don't-get-them-to-do-it-now-they-never-will sentiment as well.

As a result of this crusade, parents are left in a tough spot. They feel guilty when their actions don't result in a child who eats willingly, and they often give up or feel like they are doing something wrong.

But what if I told you there are real advantages to having a picky kid? What if all those crusaders are, well, maybe a little off base?

Here are 5 advantages to having a child who is slow to warm up to food:

1. Food regulation: Excess weight, one of the biggest health issues of our time, stems from trouble regulating food intake, such as the inability to stop when full, etc. Normally developing picky kids (different from problematic picky eating I discuss here) tend to have low appetites, because their growth slows considerably after the first two years of life.

When you think about the health challenges your child is likely to face in the next 20 years, eating small amounts at dinner doesn't seem so bad. I know from experience that parents who have kids who eat anything also have children with big appetites, causing them another type of worry. While that doesn't have to be a bad situation either, it makes sense to look on the bright side of a child who doesn't need a lot of food to be satisfied.

2. Discerning palate: Kids who are more cautious with food are often overwhelmed by different tastes and textures. We know this is why vegetables tend to be disliked—they are bitter. In fact, one study showed that 70% of preschool children are considered "tasters" of bitter compounds, also called 6-n-propylthiouracil (PROP).

But this taste sensitivity mellows out over time and can turn into quite an asset. Having a discerning palate is helpful to chefs who refine recipes based on tastings. As long as parents keep serving a variety of wholesome food, picky kids can come to appreciate quality, the delicate balance of flavors and may even take an interest in cooking.

3. They challenge our cooking skills: Before I had kids, I cooked a handful of meals, but after having kids I can't even count how many meals I've experimented with (and I've had more failures than I care to admit). I have attempted at least 5 different versions of macaroni and cheese. I have mastered easy meals in the slow cooker. I have discovered the beauty of roasting veggies which are great for kids because they are crunchy and less bitter. And I even came up with what I consider the best homemade chicken tender recipe.

Whether meals stick or not, cooking for choosy kids has enhanced my cooking for the better. But if my kids ate everything, I probably would still be in my rut.

4. They teach life lessons: Where do I start on the life lessons of dealing with picky eaters? I've learned patience, how to put my own agenda aside and how to trust my kids instead of fight them. I simply cannot control what they eat or prefer but I can control the circumstances that help them eat well—meals, structure and how pleasant (or not) meals are.

But most importantly, I'm reminded of the small step-nature of lasting change and learning. There are no magic tricks to get kids to eat just like there are no quick fixes to obtaining good health. Kids are learning about food the same way they learn to read or write. We need to trust that they will get there in their own time

and in their own way. Anything worthwhile is an investment and I am in this for the long haul.

5. Picky-ness is part of your child: My five-year-old son is very cautious and a late bloomer with everything, including food. I wouldn't try to change this aspect of his personality because it is part of who he is. And I love him dearly.

Now that doesn't mean I've given up. I just have accepted that his food acceptance will be slow and steady. And when you think about it, being extra cautious isn't such a bad quality to have.

It's time to start a whole new conversation about picky eating. Underneath the refusals and food requests, kids really do want to learn and grow with food. The advantages of having a picky kid are real, if you take the time to look at it—and your child—in a completely different light.

For additional tips to help feed 'picky eaters' over the holidays, check out a previous Scoop on Food post here.

Image of a young boy is making a funny disgusting face at a fork with a healthy piece of broccoli via shutterstock.

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