

The Atlantic

Inside the Mind of a Picky Eater

Why some kids are so finicky about their food



Suzanne Plunkett / Reuters

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As a child, I earned myself something of a reputation for spoiling family holiday get-togethers. The typical scene: My family trading jokes around the table, the air rich with smells of spices and food and slightly musty tablecloths—and then me, loudly protesting the contents of my plate, my displeasure registering in increasingly shrill arpeggios.

I was a picky eater, in other words. And according to Natasha Chong Cole, a

doctoral student in nutritional sciences at the University of Illinois, I had good company. “Ask any pediatrician, and they’ll tell you one of the most common concerns of parents” is picky eating, she said.

According to a recently published [review](#) in the journal *Appetite*, children enter their pickiest phase of life around age 2. This pickiness generally declines by the time they turn 6, but some developments exacerbate the problem along the way. Around 3, for example, most children realize that parents can misrepresent food. (This is when they grow wise to counterfeit “yum” sounds and spoons posing as airplanes.)

A finicky stage may have an evolutionary advantage, the study authors argue: Research has shown that children 16 to 29 months old are likely to mouth “crayons, dish soaps, and even imitation feces” before their more discerning phase begins. Children under 2 are also more likely to accidentally poison themselves than older children. A pickier phase may help young children without much food experience distinguish between the edible and inedible.

If this is the case, though, then I was the kind of kid who exercised an overabundance of caution. I used to pass hours at the dining-room table, staring down all the items left on my plate after I’d consumed everything beige. These evenings were fun for no one, myself included. I wanted to like vegetables. I knew my life would be easier if I liked vegetables. I just ... didn’t.

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Tamara Melton, a dietician and nutritionist at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, says that repeatedly exposing children to new foods is a key part of helping them overcome finicky eating habits.

“When kids are first trying new food, they take up to 20 times to eat it,” she said.

But some kids don’t like foods even once they’re familiar. The 21st time I rejected peas, for example, it wasn’t because I still didn’t know them well enough.

Cole says that genes explain some picky eating. The best known example, a gene called “TASR38,” codes for bitter taste receptors. Variants in gene expression can determine a person’s sensitivity to bitterness, and in turn, how they feel about certain foods. But it’s not just bitterness, Cole says; there’s a whole suite of genes that determines taste preferences.

For this reason, Melton and Cole both say that parents should try and avoid forcing kids to eat things they don’t like.

“Offer the food, but don’t pressure the kid to eat it,” Melton said. Nor should parents offer vegetables as a stepping-stone to dessert, unless they want their children to view eating vegetables as a chore.

That’s not to say that parents should throw up their hands, though. A recent [paper](#) in *Appetite* found that mothers who subtly influence their children’s eating raise more open-minded eaters than those who openly control them.

“No one likes being told what to do,” said Megan Jarman, a nutritionist from the University of Southampton and the paper’s lead author. Some mothers in the study controlled their children’s diets by limiting the number of unhealthy snacks they bought, while keeping healthy fruits and vegetables within easy reach. Between ages 2 and 5, those children’s eating habits improved compared to their peers whose parents didn’t use this strategy.

These early improvements have lasting consequences. Once kids settle into picky eating, “it’s really hard to change that,” Cole said. In other words, picky

kids become picky adults.

I can vouch for that, unfortunately. I recently filled out a common [questionnaire](#) scientists use to assess children's eating woes, though, and it turns out I've made a lot of progress. Granted, it's still a big deal for me to have a pack of asparagus in my fridge, but at least I have it. It's a step.

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