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## Kids' bodies often tell them what and how much to eat

By **SAMANTHA CRITCHELL**, **Associated Press**  
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Parents try it all: Bribery, camouflage, threats and sweet talk. But no matter what they do, children just don't seem to want to clean their plates.

That's probably because kids usually know what they like, know what they need and know what disagrees with their palates and the rest of their bodies better than anyone else — even well-intentioned parents, says Donna Fish, a social worker specializing in eating disorders.

"Sort of like everyone has their own style; everyone has their own taste in food," says Fish, noting that for young children, deciding what they put in their mouth is the most independence they exert in a day.

Fish, who is on the faculty at Columbia University School of Social Work, is the author of "Take the Fight Out of Food: How To Prevent and Solve Your Child's Eating Problems" (Atria).

She points out that the senses of taste and smell and the acclimation to textures develop the same way as eyesight and hearing — over a period of years.

"When you're 7, the muscles in your eye stabilize enough to hold steady the words on the page and read. ... Some kids walk and run early and they're speech is slower, some are vice versa. They are listening to their bodies and parents shouldn't interfere. Try to see a picky eater in the same way. Babies and children are instinctive eaters, let them do it at their own pace," Fish says.

Also, she adds, food allergies are more common today than ever before and other kids have digestive issues, such as gastric reflux, which can make eating certain foods unpleasant or even dangerous.

So what if your children don't finish their broccoli one night or skip a serving of protein? And what about the kids who only eat green beans dipped in ketchup?

"What's the problem? And whose problem is it?" Fish says.

Nutrition is taken into the body over a period of up to two weeks, she says. "On the weekend when it's one birthday party after another, just relax. Two-year-olds will take only one bite of the birthday cake if they're full, and 3-year-olds will be more likely to use it as a tool to test limits — and you never want food to be a battleground for control."

Fish says she aims to get children to take responsibility for their own bodies and to help them separate food feelings from other feelings, like boredom and anxiety. She's also trying to give parents tools to convince children that they want to eat a well-balanced diet.

"Always connect nutrition to things they like to do, the more they can make a connection, the more it makes sense to them," she says. Encourage would-be tree climbers to eat foods that will strengthen their muscles so they'll be able to go higher, and tell doll enthusiasts that with plenty of protein, they'll have more energy to play longer.

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Fish adds: "If parents start to overfeed or start to hover over a picky eater, they're hurting the kids in the long run. You want to give kids healthy eating habits for life. Teach them to stay very close to their body's signals about hunger and fullness," she says.

AJ Conklin, a 4-year-old from Ridgefield, Conn., seemed like a picky eater: He wouldn't go near green vegetables. His mother, Christine Conklin, says she didn't push too hard because she grew up in an "eat-your-dinner-or-there's-no-dessert" household and she didn't want to pressure her son that way. She wanted to give AJ a chance to acquire tastes — and if he never liked green vegetables, that was OK.

Now she's glad she took the gentler route. Because nut allergies run in the family, AJ recently was tested for a variety of foods. It turned out he's not only allergic to peanuts and tree nuts, but also green beans, peas and soybeans.

"I used to think he was a very picky eater but now I'm thinking that it was nature's way of protecting my child," Conklin says.

Peanuts, tree nuts, such as almonds and pecans, soybeans, milk, eggs and wheat are the most common trigger foods, according to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network.

Chef Ming Tsai, owner of Blue Ginger restaurant in Wellesley, Mass., and host of TV's "Simply Ming," has become an even more creative cook to accommodate the allergies of his 5-year-old son David, who can't have soy, wheat, dairy, eggs, shellfish or nuts.

"He eats great. ... You can't feel sorry for David, dinner for him might be organic lamb racks with fried rice noodles," Tsai says.

"The base for any kind of cooking for people with allergies or who are picky is to feed them food that tastes good. Give them flavorful food. When the palate is growing, you don't want the palate to be bland."

Tsai is the national spokesman for the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network and collaborated with WGBH, Boston's public television station, for an awareness campaign that includes incorporating a peanut-allergy storyline into the preschool cartoon "Arthur."

Most people will outgrow food allergies, except for nuts, says Anne Munoz-Furlong, executive director of FAAN, so parents need to approach the topic carefully so they don't scare kids away from eating cheese, eggs and other healthy foods later in life. "You want to balance the message you give: 'Don't eat these foods now' and 'You're not missing much' with 'You might eat it someday' and 'It's really good.'"

She encourages focusing on something other than the actual food in front of them and all its implications. Instead, challenge the kids to eat everything that's red on their plate or cut sandwiches into shapes, she suggests.

"Make food enjoyable and a game instead of focusing on what foods can't be eaten," Munoz-Furlong says.

#### Eating styles

There are six basic eating styles, according to "Take the Fight Out of Food: How To Prevent and Solve Your Child's Eating Problems" (Atrium). In the book, she defines each style and offers tips to help each develop good eating habits:

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— Food demanders either want a certain food all the time — usually sweets — or they simply demand more food. They often are temperamentally intense and strong-willed and they might use food for emotional purposes.

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Establish rules about junk food. You may want to give your children some control by letting them decide when they can have their treats — it really doesn't matter nutritionally if they have a cookie in the morning or at night — but parents should control how much the kids get and how often they get it.

— Trouble transitioners have difficulty getting to the table or they have trouble stopping eating once they start. These children are usually highly reactive to change and need help adapting to a new situation. If children don't seem to know when to stop eating, encourage them to wait 10 minutes before taking more. Explain that their brains may not have gotten the signal that they're full.

But if children are indeed still hungry, give them more. It's important to give the kids some control.

— Picky eaters find very little they like and keep changing their minds. They can be sensitive to the color, smell and texture of food, as well as other environmental factors. As long as they are where they should be on the growth curve, have enough energy and are generally happy, don't interfere too much.

Let the kids to determine portion sizes since getting them to try something new is the biggest part of the battle — and try not to call attention to it when they do.

— Beige food eaters insist on mostly white or beige foods, which tend to be bland. These children also can be sensitive to their environments. Most likely, these children are getting adequate nutrition, and you can make healthy foods in the colors they like. For example, a smoothie with yogurt, soy protein, pears, apples and green grapes ends up looking pretty nondescript.

— Spurt eaters barely eat for days and then chow down. They usually show less interest in food than others. Write down what these children eat for two weeks. Remember that kids don't need a lot of calories to keep going. Also, little bits of food add up.

— Grazers nibble throughout the day but avoid sitting down to a complete meal. They also can be easily distracted. Allow mealtimes to last longer but don't expect the kids to sit for very long. Again, if you're worried about intake, keep a food log. Also, ask yourself if you're contributing to the habit by offering too many snacks or snacks that are too big.



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