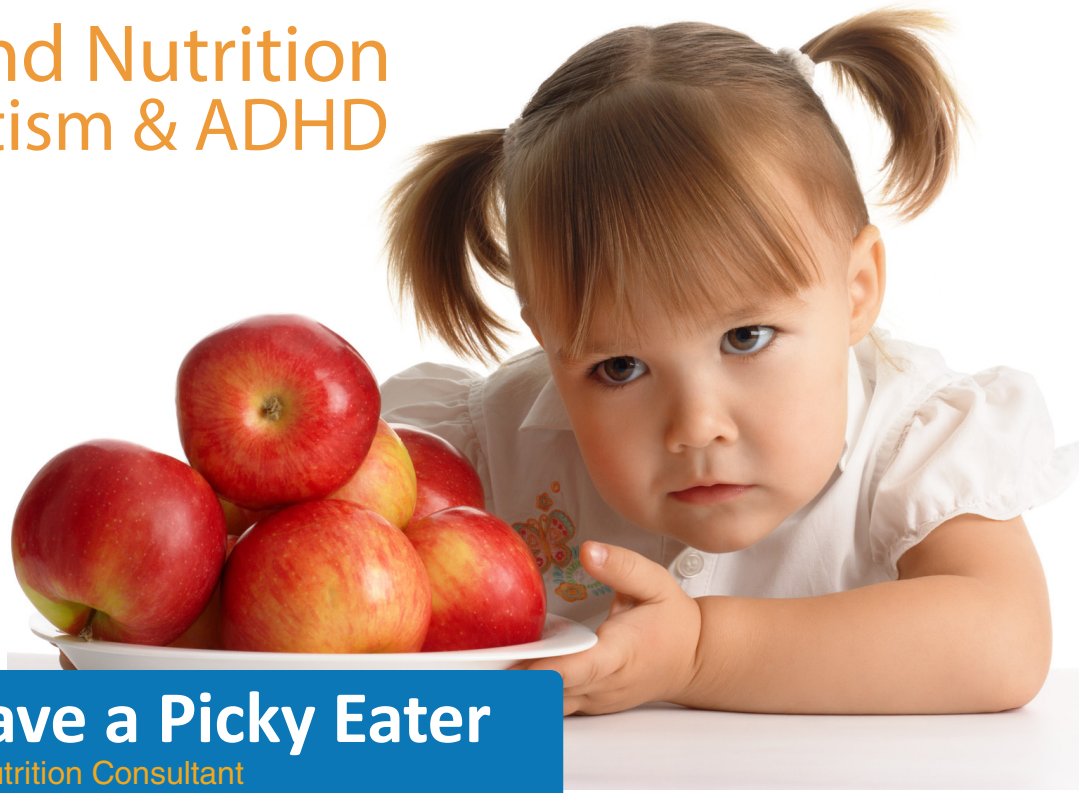




Using Food and Nutrition to Improve Autism & ADHD



What if You Have a Picky Eater

By Julie Matthews, Certified Nutrition Consultant

Are you considering a special diet, like gluten-free/casein-free (GFCF), but your child is a picky eater?

If you are like many parents I know, you may be thinking, “My child is picky and inflexible. How will I ever get him to eat anything other than wheat and dairy? Never mind anything ‘healthy.’”

It is quite common for children with autism, speech and language delays, and other conditions to be “picky eaters.” In the 1940s, researcher Leo Kanner first noticed feeding issues in children with autism. Many factors influence this: sensory sensitivities or oral-motor challenges, nutrient deficiencies, anxiety, food addictions/cravings, and more. In this article, I will investigate this and explore what you can do to help your picky eater.

I’ve worked directly with hundreds of families on these issues, most are addressing food cravings or “addictions,” factors that influence picky eating. For example, when the body creates opiates from foods (as with many children with autism) a child

can become “addicted” and thus crave nothing but those foods.

Children eventually narrow their choices to include only foods that make them “feel better” (in the short term). It’s worth trying to interrupt the pattern, because once the child moves past the cravings (a few days to a few weeks), food choices often expand dramatically and it becomes much easier to follow a special diet.

Most of my clients’ children with autism, initially eat limited amounts of vegetables, if any. Routinely though, once they begin a diet (and the cravings diminish and appetite increases), children begin eating more vegetables (or meat) - often for the very first time. Most of my clients report this type of positive experience after progressing with diet.

Parents are often very surprised to see their child expand their diet once the problematic foods have been removed. I have heard countless stories from parents who tell me that after they removed problematic foods (often containing gluten and casein), their child became less restrictive—and began to

eat many new foods, including vegetables and protein.

Factors Affecting Picky Eating

There are many reasons for picky eating. As a nutrition professional, I’m investigating the biochemical reasons for picky eating - reasons that can often be addressed through particular attention to diet and nutrition.

To be sure, there are some children that are so self-limiting as to require additional assistance to broaden their diet - more on this later.

From a biochemical perspective, here are some solid reasons why children may become so one-sided in their food choices:

- “Addictions” to opiates (gluten/casein) can influence the self selection of primarily wheat and dairy containing foods. According to this theory, when gluten (wheat) and casein (dairy) are not digested properly and enter the bloodstream, the body creates compounds that mimic the effects of morphine. They trigger opioid receptors in the



NOTE: Don't remove all foods with the expectation that "if they're hungry, they'll eventually eat." While this may be true for many children, some have real feeding problems and may stop eating altogether, which could be very problematic. Add new foods before removing others. Be sure to seek professional guidance from a feeding specialist or qualified clinician if your child won't add any new foods.

brain and drive opiate (morphine-like) cravings/addictions. The child then becomes restricted to only the foods that fuel this addictive cycle, creating very limited and picky eating.

- "Addictions" to chemicals (MSG, artificial additives) can affect restriction to one brand or a strong preference for processed foods. These chemicals can also be addicting like opiates. MSG is known to create "excitement" in the brain by stimulating the glutamate (excitatory) receptor, making food seem to taste much better. Artificial ingredients such as artificial colors and flavors can also affect similar cravings.
- Nutrient deficiencies (such as zinc) can make all foods taste bad or bland. When zinc is deficient (a common finding in children with autism), one's sense of smell is reduced and food tastes boring or unappetizing. Texture can then become an even bigger factor - imagine eating mashed potatoes if you can't taste the potato flavor - it's a bland mouthful of mush.
- Yeast, viral, and microbial overgrowth may cause hyper focus on eating mainly high carbohydrate and sugar rich foods. Yeast and other microbes feast on carbohydrates and sugar. They can actually get their "host" (your child) to eat the food that feeds them by giving off chemicals that get kids to crave refined carbohydrates and sugar. This can create self-limitation to only these foods.

Investigating these biochemical factors is vital to your overall success at nourishing hope - the body-brain connection is proven science.

Support Team

Need help? An experienced nutrition consultant can gently guide your dietary changes; which foods to substitute when a food is removed, healthy foods to incorporate into the diet, and creative cooking ideas. Your biomedical or integrative physician can help support overall health and medical needs; such as nutrient deficiencies, yeast overgrowth, and more. A feeding therapist, occupational or speech therapist, or behavior therapist can assist with varied picky eating needs.

A small number of children are "problem feeders" and/or have medical reasons for their limited eating and need professional support and therapy to address their more complex issues.

Sensory sensitivities can result in restricting foods of certain textures. For children with tactile and sound sensitivities, texture can be a hurdle. Crunchy foods can be too loud, mushy foods can become intolerable. Seek an occupational therapist or other professional that can help you work through these sensory integration challenges. A feeding therapist can help too. It's common that as sensory integration therapies begin to address food textures, a child's diet begins to expand even more.

If you suspect these more serious feeding issues, it's advised to work with someone and/or have your child assessed. And if this is a concern for you, do not try "sneaking" things into your child's favorite foods as they may lose trust and reject the food al-

together in the future. Get help.

Few children suffer these very significant feeding issues - *most* will eventually expand their diet through concerted focus and effort.

Once you've identified possible causes of your child's finicky eating habits, begin to look for creative ways to address them and get support when you need it. If you have your child's trust around food and you're able to make some changes to your child's diet, consider the following ideas. If you are unsure, seek a professional evaluation first.

Make Nutritious Foods Enjoyable

Don't let picky eating stop you from implementing a special diet. Indeed, addressing these issues is essential to the effectiveness of any specialized diet because sometimes the diet won't expand until certain foods are removed. So, before implementing a special diet try to identify new (replacement) foods your child will eat. Then, after the problematic or addictive foods are removed, see if your child will expand little by little. In other words, find several breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack options for the new diet, often making one-for-one substitutions with foods they already eat. This way, you are not removing any foods in an already restrictive diet. After initiating the new diet, such as GFCF, then begin to try adding new foods and some vegetables of varied texture. Even if your child has been on a diet for a while or has not yet begun to implement a

Nourishing hope takes persistence and patience; even the pickiest eaters can progress and benefit from improved diet.



new diet, there are suggestions below that can be helpful for getting new and nutritious foods into the diet.

Based on your picky eater's preferences, learn to make foods crunchy or smooth. Be aware that brand preference may be due to MSG or other additives that can be addictive, making that food "exciting." Add enough salt to make your "version" of their favorite more flavorful--don't go overboard but don't overly limit salt either.

Be creative! Begin to add vegetables where you can and slowly introduce foods slightly differently than they have had before. See if you can make food a little different each day--not so much that they reject it, but just enough that they don't expect sameness--and to get in new nutrients. Add purees to pancakes, applesauce, meatballs, or sauces. Try things in a texture they like. Make vegetables crunchy by making carrot chips, sweet potato fries, or vegetable latkes. Hide meat in pancakes (chicken pancakes). Try mixing or diluting a brand of food/beverage they like with a healthier version in very small amounts until the item is swapped for the new food - this works well for milks, peanut/nut butters, apple sauce and other foods that blend well.

Here are some good tasting ideas for introducing vegetables, fermented foods, and meat into a child's diet. I share many of these tactics and recipes in my *Cooking To Heal* cookbook and instructional videos.

Pureed vegetables:

- Add to muffins
- Add to pancakes $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup puree per cup of pancake flour mix
- Include in meatballs, meat patties, and meat loaf
- Mix into sauces (i.e. tomato)

Shredded vegetables:

- Add shredded beets to chocolate birthday cake (let parents know)
- Add shredded carrots to muffins
- Add shredded zucchini to bread

Crispy texture vegetables:

- Make vegetables into chips (like potato chips). Use carrots, sweet potatoes, butternut squash, beets, parsnips, or other roots or dense vegetables. Try baked kale chips.
- Shred zucchini and other vegetables, and add to shredded potato for crispy vegetable/potato hash-browns or latkes

Fermented foods:

- Shred apple and add 50/50 with raw sauerkraut to reduce sourness. Serve as shredded fruit salad.
- Puree raw sauerkraut or other cultured vegetables in food processor with apple sauce (or other fruit sauce)
- Add non-dairy yogurt (such as nut milk yogurt or coconut yogurt) to fruit and puree into a smoothie, or use a small amount of fruit and make a fruit-yogurt dipping sauce for fruit kebabs.

Animal Foods:

- For children who do not like the texture of protein, try pureeing cooked chicken breast and add it to muffins or pancakes. Chicken pancakes are simply a chicken breast and three eggs blended in a food processor into a batter and poured into a pan and cooked like any pancake. Or add a small amount of pureed cooked chicken (approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, less to start) to a regular flour-based pancake or muffin recipe.
- Homemade bone broths are rich in nutrients. Use broth for soups or stews. Cook grains or pasta in broth. Add concentrated homemade broth to sauces.

[MORE MEAL IDEAS & RECIPES in my next article HOW TO BEGIN AND SUCCEED AT A SPECIAL DIET](#)

Here are some ideas to help picky eaters become introduced to new foods:



- Always provide food child likes in addition to one "new" food.
- Involve your children in food preparation of "new" food.
- Don't require them to do anything other than get familiar with it. Consider incorporating the food into therapy or play time.
- Inform them. Let child know whether it is sweet, salty or sour. Eat some yourself and tell them how delicious it is.
- First have them touch it and lick it without eating it.
- Let them chew it and spit it out.
- Start with only a small taste ~ 1/2 teaspoon. Let child determine amount.
- Try and Try Again! At least 15 times!
- Get creative. Try new food in preferred texture - crunchy, smooth.
- Avoid being emotionally "attached" - children sense anxiety. Keep mealtime calm. Visualize child eating/enjoying new food.
- Avoid forcing or pushing - maintain trust.
- Choose rewards or other encouragement - however not food-based rewards.
- Make sure whole family participates - serve everyone at the table.
- Make it fun!

Step-by-Step Progress

While it may be frustrating to cook food and have your child refuse it, try your best to avoid projecting negative energy or frustration. Children are very sensitive and pick up on your cues, which affect how they feel in general and about the food you are serving. Also, is/was mom or dad a picky eater? If so, try having the other person, who can project positive feelings about the food, feed the child.

Set yourself up for success by making sure that each meal includes something you know they will eat, along with the new food. Taste it yourself and make sure it tastes good.

Try introducing new foods at snack time - aim to replace crackers, chips and refined carbs that kids fill up on, making them less hungry and "motivated" for a healthy dinner. By offering a new and healthy food at snack, they may slowly begin a more nutritious diet; and if they turn it down, they will be hungrier for that healthy dinner.

Getting good nutrition is essential to good health and healing. Begin a special diet and add nutritious foods



step by step. You can do it-and your child can too! I have seen countless children expand their diet. You'll be pleasantly surprised when they eat that first vegetable, and more!

Nourishing hope takes persistence and patience; even the pickiest eaters can progress and benefit - including your child.

In the final article of this *Get Started Guide*, I'll explain How to Begin and Succeed at a Special Diet.

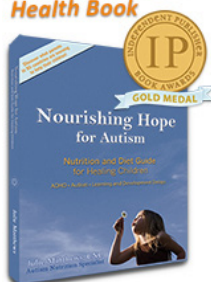
This information stems from Julie's learning with clients that are picky eaters and parents' experiences. Julie is not a feeding specialist. This information is intended to help parents find creative ways to feed their children healthy food. It is not intended to replace professional feeding therapy or medical needs. Parents of children with serious feeding issues should seek professional and medical guidance.



ABOUT JULIE MATTHEWS

Julie Matthews is an internationally respected Certified Nutrition Consultant specializing in autism spectrum disorders. She is an expert in applying food, nutrition, and diet to aid digestive health and systemic healing. Her guidance and support tools stem from extensive research and applied clinical experience. Julie supports parents of children with autism from around the world and collaborates with pediatricians, family doctors, and researchers. She educates at the leading biomedical autism conferences, writes for autism publications, and has a private nutrition practice San Francisco, California.

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Autism diet intervention guide for parents and professionals. Provides the scientific WHY and HOW various diets help children find relief from the symptoms of autism and ADHD. Contains step-by-step nutrition guide that stems from extensive clinical experience and research.



COOKING TO HEAL

Inspiring 4 hour LIVE nutrition and cooking class – with Special Diet Cookbook (diet compliant recipes.) Learn to follow any special diet; how to provide good nutrition, address food restrictions and sensitivities, and still create meals families (and picky eaters) will love.