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Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences

Helping Your Child with Picky Eating

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What is picky eating?

Picky eating is a common and a normal part of childhood development. Between the ages of 2-4, many children naturally become more selective about the foods they eat. However, picky eating can persist beyond these early years.

What does it look like?

As toddlers develop independence, they begin making their own choices about food. Changes in appetite and refusing certain foods are common parts of development.

ARFID

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) goes beyond typical picky eating. Children eat too little or avoid many foods, leading to nutritional/emotional concerns. ARFID is not related to weight or body image.

Signs of ARFID

Common signs of ARFID include:

- Very limited food variety (<5 foods)
- Low appetite or feeling full quickly
- Sensory sensitivities (texture, smell, taste)
- Fear of choking, vomiting, or pain

If these signs are persistent or affect growth or quality of life, consult your child's pediatrician.

General Tips

1. Establish a Mealtime Routine

- Offer 3 meals and 2-3 snacks at consistent times of the day.
- Eat every 3-4 hours to build natural hunger cues.

2. Use Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement encourages desired behaviors by pairing them with rewards.

- Use small rewards (stickers or playtime)
- Praise effort rather than outcome (e.g., "Great job taking one bite!").

3. Introduce New Foods, Gradually

- Start with familiar foods similar to what your child already eats, but try different brands, shapes, or textures.
- Pair or mix new foods with familiar favorites, like dipping carrots in a preferred dip or mixing veggies in rice.