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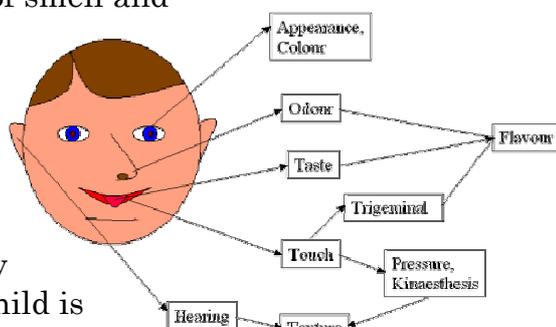
## ***When Does Picky Eating Go Beyond Normal?***

You have planned your meal. You spent hours shopping and cooking. The food looks just like the picture in the cookbook and it smells heavenly! You gather your family to sit at the table to eat. Your kids take one look at your edible creation and say “Ewww, I don’t like that!”

We have all been there. Children can be very picky eaters. However, some children are more than just picky eaters. They have medical conditions that cause eating problems so severe, they threaten their health and well-being. The following will give you a brief description of what picky eating looks like in normal children and what it looks like when it goes beyond normal.

### **Normal Reasons for Picky Eating**

The senses of smell and taste are closely linked, and these senses are fully developed by the time a child is born. Small children will taste the full flavor of a food, while older children and adults experience toned down tastes and smells. Children also have sensitive nerve endings around and inside



the mouth, making them more aware of the textures of food. The result is a natural tendency for toddlers and young children to be picky about food. Other factors play into this pickiness and help determine whether or not a child will remain a picky eater, including how a child’s parents respond to food, how they present food to the child, how mealtimes are structured, what kinds of snacks are offered to the child, and whether or not food is offered as a reward.

### **Causes of Eating Problems**

While many children are picky about food when they are young, they often outgrow it. Some children do not, however, and the variety of foods they eat may be extremely limited. When picky eating is extreme, a child’s nutrition and health may be compromised.

Sometimes a child’s picky eating is directly related to a health condition, such as autism, ADHD, Down’s syndrome, cerebral palsy, food allergies, and many others.

*Taste, smells, texture, appearance, medical & environmental factors can all contribute to eating problems.*

### **How to Identify Eating Problems**

So how do you tell if your child’s picky eating habits are a part of normal development or if they could pose a health problem? Here are a few things to look for:

- Healthy children who are picky eaters will gradually increase the variety of foods that they will eat. Even if they remain picky eaters as teens or adults, they will eat a large enough variety of food to be able to maintain a balanced diet and avoid health problems.
- Children with eating problems will eat a severely limited variety of foods and may avoid eating altogether. For example, a child with a sensory processing disorder may be overly sensitive to the taste and texture of many foods and may only eat certain foods that are predictable in taste, texture and shape, such as Goldfish crackers or chicken nuggets.
- Children with gastrointestinal or swallowing disorders may only eat foods that are bland or soft. These children end up experiencing additional health problems due to the lack of nutrition in their diets if they do not receive help for their conditions.



- It is normal for young children to refuse to eat new foods and they may resist or have tantrums when a new food is presented. These behaviors will disappear once a child has been exposed to a new food enough times to become used to it. Research on

this topic suggests that it takes 10-15 exposures for a child to adapt to a new food.

- Children with eating problems will take much longer to become used to a new food and may not adapt to it at all. They may continue to have tantrums and those tantrums may become severe or out of control. The child may appear afraid of new foods and may be anxious during meals. An example is a child with autism who runs screaming from the table every time he sees a new piece of fruit.
- Normal children will occasionally cough or choke while eating. They may refuse to eat afterward or may be afraid to eat the foods that caused them to choke. This fear fades with time and these children will return to eating the foods that caused the problem.
- Children with eating problems may repeatedly cough, gag or choke during meals. They may avoid foods that have certain textures or tastes, as these foods trigger the mechanisms that cause them to cough or choke. These children will continue to avoid these foods and may significantly limit the variety in their diets as a result.
- Healthy children who refuse to eat will eventually become hungry enough that they will eat, even if the food they are given is not a favorite food. They gradually learn to eat

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what is available when they are hungry.

- Children with eating problems will continue to refuse to eat. Even if they are very hungry, if the foods available are not foods that they think are acceptable, they will refuse it. Some children will drop alarming amounts of weight and will require medical intervention to correct the weight loss and resulting nutritional problems.

### **What to Do If You Suspect an Eating Problem**

While normal, healthy children will often grow out of their picky eating habits, children with health conditions such as the ones mentioned above will not, and will

require help to take in enough nutrition to stay healthy. These eating problems do not usually go away by themselves. If your child is displaying any of the above mentioned eating problems, it is important that you have your child examined by his or her pediatrician. Your child's doctor can help determine if your child has a health condition that is affecting his or her ability to eat.

Doctors will then usually refer children to specialists, such as occupational therapists, speech therapists, and registered dieticians who as a team can provide strategies to help your child's eating problems. Don't wait if you feel that your child's picky eating habits are extreme. Talk to your doctor right away.

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She has taught workshops in the US and Asia and is a published author. Her book "The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor and Sensory Games" was released in July 2013. Karen currently lives in Phuket, Thailand where she has a private practice and works collaboratively with families and schools.

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