



## Picky Eating in Children

### A True Problem or Just a Phase?

The plate of spiders is on the table. The threats and promises have begun.

From a parent's view, the plate is every day food and not the child's perspective of disgusting spiders. This is the anxiety, fear and reality for some children.

Many of the usual network support circles would like us to think this is just a problem of the few and not a likely reality for you. The statistics differ.

Eating specialists around the world estimate that 5-10% of all children suffer from very selective eating or ARFID. This is not a "phase," nor something that children will normally grow out of without intervention. These are the children for whom a new food, or a variation on a familiar food, can be indescribably challenging and anxiety producing.

Even taking the lower number would mean that statistically, in every class of twenty, there is one child who has really extreme issues around food. From my

experience, these figures stack up. There is also a correlation between eating issues, anxiety and other disorders like ADHD and autism, as an estimated 80+ of those with ASD.

These are the children who are unable to go to sleepovers without military style planning (and even then, often not). They and their parents stress about camp for years before it's even on the radar. Often, unwittingly, we exacerbate this stress as food is a central theme.

Picky eating is, by definition, hard to define. There are no proscribed parameters by which to measure the level, the severity or the factors that give rise to the label "picky." Measurements and comparisons are therefore challenging as is determining whether a child has an eating issue that is of concern or is merely exhibiting normal developmental traits.

This is further muddled dependent upon whose lens "picky" is viewed through. General Practitioners are primarily looking for height and weight to be on a consistent curve and so often look for this as the guiding parameter. Even very selective eaters are usually able to eat enough food

*These children are not able to function around food in the same way as the average eater and therefore our approach must also be different.*

for growth in the primary years, especially as the foods that are normally acceptable are calorie dense carbohydrates.

Parents approach food and feeding from as varied an angle as the parents are varied themselves. However, working with over 100 families each year has shown me that parents are indeed the best people to determine whether there is an issue with their child's eating. Prepping and serving food 3-5 times per day, 7 days a week gives a parent unique insight into their child's eating.

Generally, parents are very aware when their child's eating is markedly different to that of their peers and often this is apparent from a very early age. In fact, those children with really extreme issues around food are often challenged eaters even as babies. Research has shown that babies who go on to be selective eaters have different sucking patterns even at just two weeks old.

For those children who find eating less challenging, but are still struggling to eat from all food groups, find new fare difficult or they can't participate in family meals. For them, picky eating is still a very real issue. Parents find mealtimes stressful, frustrating and guilt-inducing.

They worry their child is not getting all the nutrients they need. They are embarrassed by what's sent in the lunchbox. They are concerned that their child is unable to comfortably attend social functions.

However, acknowledging the problem is real and empathising with a parent can make all the difference. Feeling that a concern is legitimate enables parents to continue working for a solution.

Feeding and eating however, are not intuitive. Many children eat widely and well, many others just don't. Often families have one child who struggles to eat and other siblings who don't. When things go well it seems natural and intuitive. If things don't, there is little guidance or common practice that informs us how to make changes that are gentle and yet effective.

When children are at school food often becomes more challenging as they are away from support and familiarity. Negative attention on the lunchbox contents can exacerbate problems eating.

Although we all, parents of selective eaters included, want to see our children eating a well-rounded diet, often this is just not achievable at school lunchtime. Children who are not comfortable around a variety of foods need the security of favourite items.

They eat better, as do we all, with less scrutiny and in an atmosphere that is relaxed and pleasant.

In general, parents who have had children who eat well are perplexed by those that don't. There is often the feeling that permissive parenting has generated a nugget and cracker diet. However, my experience has been the opposite. The majority of parents who have selective eaters have spent endless hours focused on food, feeding strategies and solutions to address their child's problem.

However, whether a child struggles to eat because it is indeed a phase, a parenting issue or an innate difficulty around food, there are solutions. Internationally recognised strategies have been proven to work for even the most selective of children.

In the next issue we'll look at practical ways to support children from across the eating spectrum. 



Judith is passionate about ensuring all children can approach food from a place of safety and joy, not fear. She spent time cooking with children and supporting them to become confident around food. Now she works exclusively with parents providing them with the tools to get their children eating.