Frustrated at mealtimes? Tired of having your child reject food? Worried if your child is eating enough nutrients? You are not alone! Many parents experience the stress, frustration, and worry that comes with picky eating behaviors. Food choices impact a child’s weight, growth rate, and cognitive development. Additionally, the eating patterns and habits children adopt when they are young tend to stay with them into adulthood. Due to the role food plays in healthy development, there is a great deal of pressure for parents to provide their children with the best foods possible. However, this becomes challenging when children are unwilling to eat anything on their plates. Finding the right balance between giving kids the types of foods they want to eat, and making sure they get the nutrients they need to ensure a healthy lifestyle is a difficult task.

Picky eating habits can also place strain on family time, especially during meals. There are times when it feels as if mealtimes are transformed into a war zone; with screaming unhappy children refusing to eat, and parents willing to do anything to get their child to even taste the food on their plates. All of this only adds stress and tension to mealtimes, making food preparation and meal duration incredibly taxing on all involved. If this sounds like a familiar night at home, then you're in luck. Here are 10 tips and tricks to help transform your food-phobic into a pro eater!

**What You Can Do:**

- **Limit distractions**
  - With our highly electronic world it can be difficult to find time to put down the cell phones and turn off the TV. But mealtimes should be the exception. Limiting the number of distractions your child is exposed to will help them to focus on the food in front of them, and concentrate on carrots instead of their favorite cartoon.

- **Introduce food multiple times**
  - It is normal for a child to need to be introduced to new food items multiple times. Sometimes it may take as many as 4-5 times before a child is willing to even try a new food, let alone be comfortable with it. New foods can be scary and intimidating to a young child, so be patient and keep trying!

- **Role model good eating habits**
  - If you want your kids to eat their fruits and vegetables, then you need to be eating them too! Kids pick up on the behaviors of those around them. If your kids see you eating cookies they are willing to do the same.

- **Limit snacks-especially before meals**
  - Putting a limit on the number of snacks your child can have, as well as the type of snacks they can
eat, will prevent them from filling up before mealtimes. Also, having finger foods at the ready; such as apple slices, baby carrots, or nuts makes for an easy healthy snacking solution.

Cook with your kids

Involving your kids in the cooking process is a great way to get them excited about mealtimes. They will be more invested in mealtimes if they know that they have been apart of getting the food ready. Spending time cooking with your kids is also a great time for family bonding!

Let your kids choose what's for dinner

Choose two vegetables and let your kids choose which vegetable you'll be having with dinner. Giving your kids choices puts them in control of a food situation, and it gets them excited for mealtimes because they got to pick something they want to eat.

Try incorporating vegetables into their favorite meals

For example, try cooking Mac and Cheese with Butternut Squash. Your kids will be excited to have something they enjoy, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing they are eating a balanced meal.

Use fun shapes!

Sometimes playing with food is a good way to get kids excited about eating. Try cutting sandwiches into fun shapes, or calling broccoli “trees” and pretend to be a dinosaur when you're eating them. Being creative and fun will encourage kids to join in and eat up!

Don't force your child to eat

Although you may be concerned about your child's nutrient intake it is important to never force your child to eat. Force feeding your child will cause a negative association with food to develop and will only cause further advancement of poor behaviors.

Contact a dietitian if concern continues

If you are not seeing any improvement in your child, contact a dietitian to come up with a plan that is best suited to your child's needs!

While you as a parent will want to see immediate results, do not become discouraged if your child is resistant to trying new foods right away. Remember, it is important to be patient and to encourage your child to try new foods. By trying the various tips and tricks mentioned above, you will be able to reduce the stress and frustration associated with mealtimes. Healthy eating is a lifelong journey, and it is crucial that parents take the time to lay a solid foundation for their children to use in later years.

References: