



MENDING
Mealtime
NOURISHING THE SELECTIVE EATER

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I have been working with families on their health for close to a decade but nourishing my little guy (who's now 4) has taught me more about nutrition for children than any textbook I have read. He has helped me shape the way I support families and the nutritional guidance I offer.

For many of us with selective/picky/tricky eaters at home, we spend far too much time worrying about whether or not our child is eating a certain food in a form we'd prefer. Here's what I mean: My little love refuses to eat broccoli, kale, or cauliflower in their whole forms, but will happily enjoy them in his daily smoothie. Even though he doesn't like to eat those veggies in the traditional way, he's still getting all the nutritional value from them in a different form. While I still put the vegetables on his plate and trust that he will expand his horizons when he is ready, dropping my own expectations of how he should be eating a certain food and replacing it with confidence that he's getting the nutrients he needs lifted a huge weight from my shoulders.

If you find yourself struggling with the frustration or worry that your child refuses to eat the family meal, or anything green or whole grain, know you're not alone. Allow yourself to change this script. As parents we have the incredibly difficult task (among all the other difficult tasks!) of nourishing our children and expanding their food horizons. If your child doesn't like a certain food right now, that's okay! It's important to focus less on whether they're eating a particular food at a particular time in a particular way (like broccoli on a dinner plate) and focus more on whether or not they're getting their daily nutritional quotient. So let's re-group, reframe, and make a plan that makes sense for your child and for your family (and let's also pause to acknowledge that you're doing an awesome job, because you are!).

THEIR REASONS

As frustrating as it can be to have your little one constantly avoid certain foods, tastes, or textures, it's important to consider the world from their perspective. Kids always have their reasons, even if they make little sense to us big people.

The pursuit of autonomy This is not only a very natural part of development for children, but also a large source of struggle, both for them and for their caregivers. As parents, we want our children to be independent and do things for themselves, but sometimes it's really that we want them to do what we want, when we want them to do it! (We can't help it! We're grownups!) The goal is allowing for independent growth and self-development while also making sure that children are well-nourished.

Fear of the unknown Worries can sometimes enter a child's mind when presented with a new-to-them-food. To create a calm, curious environment around a new food, start by just letting your child tolerate having the new food on their plate. Once they can manage that, encourage them to freely explore the food, without the

expectation that they'll eat it. When they feel they're ready, they can sniff, lick, or even nibble a few bites! New foods may require a few appearances at the dinner table to even get a sniff!

Personal preferences Even as adults we have flavours, textures, foods, and food forms that we either love or hate. Children are the same. If there's a particular texture they love, like a cold smoothie, capitalize on this and try to jam as much good stuff in there as you can get away with!

PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

We live in an era where we are bombarded with information, opinions, and opportunities to compare ourselves and our families with others. When it comes to what our child eats (or doesn't eat!), it can be easy to blame ourselves and see their restrictive palate as a failing on our parts. As the parent of a selective eater and someone who has spent their entire adult life pursuing education and a subsequent career in clinical nutrition, I believe it's time to go a little easier on ourselves!

As much as I am a proponent for nutrition first, and food as medicine, I am also an advocate for improving the mental and emotional wellbeing of parents, which in turn has a positive effect on families. When we overthink and overanalyze every single thing our child does or doesn't put in their mouth, we put unnecessary pressure on ourselves.

Ultimately, we cannot force our children to eat. As parents we are responsible for what is served, the relationship with food we model, and the experience we cultivate. Our kids are in charge of what they eat, and how much of it. When we understand this, we can define our goals, prioritize them, and work toward them with trust and confidence while letting any extraneous pressure go.

For example, my son refuses to eat salad. While this is certainly not unheard of for a 4-year-old, I do know a few 4-year-olds who love greens. So naturally part of my brain may worry that something is wrong, or that by not enjoying salad now he'll grow up with a terrible diet and never eat salad! Likely this won't be the case, but let's follow that worry for a moment. What if he becomes an adult that never chooses to eat a salad (gasp!)? Whether he eats salad or not, he will nevertheless grow up knowing the importance of having daily greens and will probably be more likely to toss them into a smoothie or incorporate them in another way that he likes. I could become entrenched in "the shoulds", try to force him, and stress myself out over the fact that he doesn't eat salads, or I could let that all go. I can involve him in making a smoothie (see recipe on the next page) each day with spinach or kale (nutrient box checked!) and keep putting the salad on his plate so he can choose to eat it or not. What if he never eats a salad? Or what if he does? Both are possible and need not be a reason parents feel stress.