Happy Mealtimes  
(Including tips for “Picky” Eaters)  
Cover Page

Topic
- Many parents think their kids are “picky eaters” and find mealtime to be stressful. In this WIC Talk, participants will understand typical eating habits of young children so that mealtimes can be more relaxed and enjoyable.

Target Audience
- Parents/caregivers of WIC children age 1-5

Key Messages
- Learn how young children eat, and why these behaviors are normal.
- Learn how to lessen or stop stress during mealtime while getting their kids to learn how to make healthy food choices.

Handouts/Materials
- 2 year old looking doll or picture of 2 year old child (optional)
- 4 year old looking doll or picture of 4 year old child (optional)
- Bowl and cut out slips of paper (handout to cut included at the end of the WIC Talk)

References/Resources

Evaluation
What is one new thing you learned about how young children usually eat?
If your little one sits at dinner tonight just looking at her plate, what will you do?
What surprise you about how to talk about food/meals with your children?
How will you make trying a new food fun?
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Topic Overview
The following summarizes open ended questions used during the group session that follows. These can also be used during *individual education* to facilitate the discussion around this topic. Offer handouts listed on the cover page.

**OPEN**: Emotion-based education starts with provocative questions, activities or stories that lead to emotion-based conversations, not to an immediate transfer of knowledge.

Introductions
Icebreaker: Have participants introduce themselves and start with strengths:
“What do YOU do to make mealtimes with your family enjoyable?

**DIG**: During the "dig" step, the facilitator asks questions to get the learners to open up, share their memories and experiences, and get closer to the topic.

Is your child a “picky eater”? Which of these describes your child?

**CONNECT**: During the "connect" step, parents connect the conversation topic with their values, attitudes, beliefs and feelings. The facilitator helps parents reflect on their personal needs and wants and connects them to the health-related behaviors being suggested.

"Does it surprise you that all these things kids do are normal?” *Wait for responses.* “Why or why not?” or "Tell me more."

“Why do you think your child is doing these things?” “What can you do encourage your child to eat healthfully?”

**ACT**: During this “step” the facilitator helps the participants identify specific action steps and build confidence to help them be the parents they want to be.

*Offer handout on Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters, such as the one listed on page one under “References/Resources”.* Give parents time to look over the tips.

“Which of these things do you already do with your family?”

Evaluation
What is one new thing you learned about how young children usually eat?
If your little one sits at dinner tonight just looking at her plate, what will you do?
What surprise you about how to talk about food/meals with your children?
How will you make trying a new food fun?
Group Education

**OPEN**: Emotion-based education starts with provocative questions, activities or stories that lead to emotion-based conversations, not to an immediate transfer of knowledge.

**Introductions**:
- **Introduce yourself**
  - State how long the session will be (should be less than 30 minutes) and introduce the topic and key messages.
  - "We'll talk about if your child is a picky eaters, or normal. And we'll look at some tips to make meals less stressful and still help our kids eat healthier."

**Icebreaker**:
- **Have participants introduce themselves and start with strengths**:
  - "What do YOU do to make mealtimes with your family enjoyable?"
  - Turn to your neighbor and share one thing you do to make family mealtimes pleasant."
  - *(Wait for parents to share with each other, and then invite parents to share their responses with the group.)*

**DIG**: During the "dig" step, the facilitator asks questions to get the learners to open up, share their memories and experiences, and get closer to the topic.

**Is Your Child a Picky Eater or a Normal Eater?**
**EXPLORE**: "We know that mealtimes can be hard sometimes. I’m going to read some things that your child may or may not do, and I invite you to raise your hand for each one if it describes your child."

Read the following list. Wait after each one for parents to raise their hands. (You may wish to raise your own hand on some of these, to encourage parents to respond.)

- “My child makes a mess with her food.”
- “My child will not sit still for long.”
- “My child doesn’t like to try new foods.”
- “My child only wants to eat one kind of food.”
- “My child doesn’t want to eat what I serve – she wants something else.”
- “My child doesn’t eat much.”
- “My child sometimes doesn’t want to eat anything.”
- “My child used to eat everything, but now he only eats a few things.”
- “My child eats a lot one day and not much the next day.”
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Offer: “Most young kids do at least some of these things. It can be frustrating and stressful, and we worry when our kids don’t eat the way we think they should.” So, it’s good to know that all of these things that we might call “picky eating” are completely normal for young children!”

CONNECT: During the "connect" step, parents connect the conversation topic with their values, attitudes, beliefs and feelings. The facilitator helps parents reflect on their personal needs and wants and connects them to the health-related behaviors being explored.

Explore: “Does it surprise you that all these things kids do are normal?” (Wait for responses). “Why or why not?” or “Tell me more.”

“Why do you think your child is doing these things?”

Sample Responses
- They are learning about foods.
- They’re exploring how foods look, feel, smell and taste.
- They are becoming more independent, and they like to make decisions for themselves.
- They are testing limits and seeing what your reaction is.
- They are growing more slowly than they did before, so they don’t need to eat as much.

Picky Eating Video Clip or Handout
Offer: Show the video clip listed on page one under “Handouts/Materials” or offer the handout, “Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters”, as listed on page one under “Handouts/Materials”. It is also enclosed as a SSM as part of this WIC Talk.

This video (or handout) introduced some great ideas on how to work with your child to make sure they are eating as healthfully as they can for their age. It suggests trying new foods in small portions and including your child in making meals.

What do you think about these ideas?
What ideas did you like the best?

Sample Responses (from video)
- Let your child pick out fruits and vegetables at the grocery store or plant your own garden.
- Include your child in meal preparation.
  - Young children can do simple things like rinsing off the vegetables, adding simple ingredients or stirring food.
- Turn off the TV and enjoy family time during meal time.
- Offer choice but don’t make a different meal for each child.
  - If you have multiple children, let each child choose one night for the family meal.
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- Try new foods in small portions.
- Set an example by eating healthy foods yourself. Talk to your kids about new foods you tried. Describe how it tasted, smelled and how much you liked it.
- Offer only 1 new food at a time.
- Serve them something they like with a new food they have never tried before.

Other ideas (optional):
- Boundaries: Most kids want sweet treats but if they are taught that these goodies are sometimes foods and not something they have every day, they will accept eating this way.
- Consistency: You can’t allow cupcakes and brownies for snack every day one week and then tell your child to eat apples and oranges the next.
- Have fun:
  - Create a puppet show: For example: if you “feed” their favorite toy a healthy vegetable and pretend that the toy loves it, they are more likely to eat it.
  - Make up a story: For example create a story about super hero vegetables, each with a unique super power to teach about the importance of vegetables.

**ACT:** During this “step” the facilitator helps the participants identify specific action steps and build confidence to help them be the parents they want to be.

*If you didn’t offer it earlier, offer handout/SSM on Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters, (mentioned above). Give parents time to look over the tips.*

**EXPLORE:**
“Which of these things do you already do with your family?”
Wait for responses. “**Now think about something you might like to try at home.**”
Wait for a moment while parents think. “If you’d like, turn to your neighbor and share.”
Wait for parents to share with each other, and then invite parents to share their responses with the group.

**OFFER:**
“Are there some things you can say to your kids about food that are helpful, and some that are not as helpful”. [Optional Activity #1: Cut out the “Many Say” and “Instead” statements and place them in a bowl (included at the end of this WIC talk)]. Choose a volunteer to pick the slip out one at a time. Choose a few to facilitate a group discussion. Optional Activity #2: Do a pair and share: Pair participants up with one “Many Say” and “Instead” statement slip each, and have them discuss before facilitating the discussion with the larger group].

1. **Common Statement:** "**See, your (sister, brother, cousin, friend) is eating it, why don’t you?**" Why do you think you shouldn’t you say something like this?
Sample Response: 
*Translation:* "He/she is a better eater than me."
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Instead try: "I know you'll get there. It takes time and many tastes to learn to like a new food. "Why do you think this would be better to say?"
Sample Response:
This will instill confidence that the child can and will like the food in their own time.

Here are some other examples of what parents have said, how it might be translated, better approaches, and why. [You can just state the examples below or facilitate a discussion (like above) if you prefer].

2. "You used to like blueberries -- you are so picky!"
What child may hear: "Maybe I won't grow out of this picky-eating thing?"
Instead: Don't call attention to picky eating. Instead, make eating an enjoyable experience.
Rationale: Avoid labeling children as "picky" as this is a normal stage of development and the label tends to stick.

3. "For the last time, no, you cannot have ice cream!"
What child may hear: "I'm never getting ice cream again!"
Instead: "We are not having ice cream now because lunch is a half hour away. We'll have some one day this week for dessert."
Rationale: Children accept "no" much better when they know why they can't have something and when they will have it again.

4. "You didn't eat enough. Take a few more bites and then you can leave the table."
What child may hear: "Mom/dad/empty plate (anything else) is a better judge of when I'm done eating than what I'm feeling inside."
Instead say: "Make sure you got enough to eat because the next meal won't be until (breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack time)."
Rationale: When children are in charge of how much to eat, they learn how to manage hunger (hint: sometimes, mistakes have to be made).

5. "If you eat some of your veggies, you can have dessert."
What child may hear: "I can't wait until the day I don't have to eat my veggies -- and can go straight to dessert!"
Try: Instead of nagging and food rewarding, offer tasty vegetables often and model healthy eating.
Rationale: Studies show that children learn to prefer the reward food over the "have to eat" food.

6. "Good job!" (after eating more than usual)
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What child may hear: "Mommy and daddy are proud of me when I eat more food or finish my plate."
Instead say: "You always do a good job eating when you listen to your tummy."
Rationale: Complimenting children for eating more food teaches them how much they eat is more important than following their appetite, which is different from meal to meal.

7. "Eat this, it's good for you."
What child may hear: "It tastes bad."
Instead say: "This tastes really good and is similar to X that you like."
Rationale: Studies show taste rules what food kids like, and it helps for them to get more information about a new item.

8. "If you’re good in the store, you may have a cookie," or "If you don’t stop doing that, you won’t get ice cream tonight."
What child may hear: "Every time I'm good, I should get a treat!"
Instead: Let them know ahead of time what that will happen if they misbehave -- and leave food out of it.
Rationale: There may be long-term effects of rewarding with food. (For example, in a 2003 study published in Eating Behaviors), adults who remembered food being used to reward and punish were more likely to binge eat and diet.

9. "We don’t eat cake often because it is bad for you."
What child may hear: "I like everything that is bad for me (Bad = pleasure)."
Instead say: "Cake is not a food we eat all the time. We'll have some cake this weekend at Jake's birthday party."
Rationale: Calling food “good” or "bad" may cause children to feel judged. Instead, teach children how all foods can fit and some foods are “sometimes” foods and some are “anytime” foods.

10. "You don't like dinner? Want me to make you something else?"
What child may hear: "I never have to venture out with food because mom/dad will always make my favorites!"
Instead say: "We all get the same meal for dinner; sometimes you get your favorite, and other nights someone else does."
Rationale: Eating meals together teaches children eating is a family event and gets them to like more variety of food over time.

“What (about these statements) stood out or surprised you? (Wait for responses). “It is very common to for parents to say some of the “common” statements. (You may offer your personal experience). If you've found yourself or your family using the
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“common statements”, think of it as an opportunity. With practice, and knowing why it’s a good idea, you can start talking about food differently.”

Evaluation:
Explore: Read the following scenarios to parents/caregivers. Give parents time to think of ideas and respond. Add any sample responses not already shared.

“Here’s a little girl, Maria. [(May use prop from Handouts/Material section: show picture or doll of a 4 year old girl (optional)] Maria is 4 years old. She usually eats dinner by herself while watching TV. Mom decides how much Maria should eat. When Maria says she is full, Mom says “eat everything on your plate”. What could Maria’s mom do differently? Think about what we talked about today, and your own experience.

Sample Responses:
• Eat dinner together as a family
• Turn off the TV
• Let Maria decide how much to eat and stop when she is full.

“Here’s a little boy, Shawn. Shawn is 2 years old. [(May use prop from Handouts/Material section: show picture or doll of a 2 year old boy (optional)]. He used to eat everything. Now he only wants peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and milk. And some meals he doesn’t eat much at all. He does drink a lot of milk and juice between meals. What could Shawn’s parents do differently? Think about what we talked about today, and your own experience.”

Sample Responses:
• Let him have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and milk but keep offering other foods too
• Offer him water in a cup between meals when he is thirsty
• He may be eating less because he is growing more slowly now.

“We talked about some ways our kids eat that make us worry and make mealtime stressful. We also talked about how things that seem like picky eating are totally normal for young kids, so we shouldn’t stress about them.”

What is one new thing you learned about how young children usually eat? If your little one sits at dinner tonight just looking at her plate, what will you do? What surprise you about how to talk about food/meals with your children? How will you make trying a new food fun?
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Optional Activity: Cut these statements out, fold them up and put them in a bowl. Have volunteers pick one out and read it to facilitate a group discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Many say:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See, your (sister, brother, cousin, friend) is eating it, why don't you?</td>
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| Many say: You used to like blueberries. You are so picky! | Many say: If you eat some of your veggies, you can have dessert. | Many say: If you're good in the store, you may have a cookie," or "If you don't stop doing that, you won't get ice cream tonight."
| Instead: Don't call attention to picky eating. Instead, make eating an enjoyable experience. | Try: Instead of nagging and food rewarding, offer tasty vegetables often and model healthy eating. | Instead: Let them know ahead of time what that will happen if they misbehave — and leave food out of it. |
| Many say: For the last time, no, you cannot have ice cream! | Many say: "Good job!" (after eating more than usual) | Many say: We don’t eat cake often because it is bad for you. |
| Instead say: We are not having ice cream now because lunch is a half hour away. We'll have some one day this week for dessert. | Instead say: You always do a good job eating when you listen to your tummy. | Instead say: Cake is not a food we eat all the time. We'll have some cake this weekend at Jake's birthday party. |
| Many say: You don't like dinner? Want me to make you something else? | | Many say: We don’t eat cake often because it is bad for you. |
| Instead say: We all get the same meal for dinner; sometimes you get your favorite, and other nights someone else does. | | Instead say: Cake is not a food we eat all the time. We'll have some cake this weekend at Jake's birthday party. |
Self-Study Module

Procedure
Agencies must follow WIC policies for using SSM (see WIC PPM Nutrition Education for details).

Method
1. Review together or instruct the participant to read the handouts and complete the SSM, “Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters”
2. Ask participant if she would like to talk with a CHP about the information or if she has any questions.
Do any of the statements below remind you of your child?

“Ebony will only eat peanut butter sandwiches!”
“Michael won’t eat anything green, just because of the color.”
“Bananas used to be Matt’s favorite food, now he won’t even touch them!”

Your child may eat only a certain type of food or refuse foods based on a certain color or texture. They may also play at the table and may not want to eat. Don’t worry if your child is a picky eater. Picky eating behavior is common for many children from the age of 2 to 5 years. As long as your child has plenty of energy and is growing, he or she is most likely eating enough to be healthy. If you have concerns about your child’s growth or eating behavior, talk to your child’s doctor.

How to cope with picky eating

Your child’s picky eating is temporary. If you don’t make it a big deal, it will usually end before school age. Try the following tips to help you deal with your child’s picky eating behavior in a positive way. Check the ones that work for you and your child.

- **Let your kids be “produce pickers.”** Let them pick out fruits and veggies at the store.

- **Have your child help you prepare meals.** Children learn about food and get excited about tasting food when they help make meals. Let them add ingredients, scrub veggies, or help stir food.

- **Offer choices.** Rather than ask, “Do you want broccoli for dinner?” ask “Which would you like for dinner, broccoli or cauliflower?”

- **Enjoy each other while eating family meals together.** Talk about fun and happy things. If meals are times for family arguments, your child may learn unhealthy attitudes toward food.

- **Offer the same foods for the whole family.** Don’t be a “short-order cook,” making a different meal for your child. Your child will be okay even if he or she does not eat a meal now and then.
Trying new foods

Your child may not want to try new foods. It is normal for children to reject foods they have never tried before. Here are some tips to get your child to try new foods:

■ **Small portions, big benefits.** Let your kids try small portions of new foods that you enjoy. Give them a small taste at first and be patient with them. When they develop a taste for more types of foods, it’s easier to plan family meals.

■ **Offer only one new food at a time.** Serve something that you know your child likes along with the new food. Offering more new foods all at once could be too much for your child.

■ **Be a good role model.** Try new foods yourself. Describe their taste, texture, and smell to your child.

■ **Offer new foods first.** Your child is most hungry at the start of a meal.

■ **Sometimes, new foods take time.** Kids don’t always take to new foods right away. Offer new foods many times. It may take up to a dozen tries for a child to accept a new food.

Make food fun!

Help your child develop healthy eating habits by getting him or her involved and making food fun! Get creative in the kitchen with these cool ideas. Check the ones you try at home, and be sure to add your own ideas, too!

- **Cut a food into fun and easy shapes with cookie cutters.**
- **Encourage your child to invent and help prepare new snacks.** Create new tastes by pairing low-fat dressings or dips with vegetables. Try hummus or salsa as a dip for veggies.
- **Name a food your child helps create.** Make a big deal of serving “Maria’s Salad” or “Peter’s Sweet Potatoes” for dinner.
- **Our family ideas to make food fun:**

  ______________________________________________________

  ______________________________________________________

  ______________________________________________________

For more great tips on these and other subjects, go to: ChooseMyPlate.gov/preschoolers/
¿Alguna de las afirmaciones siguientes le recuerda a su hijo?

“¡Ebony sólo come sándwiches de mantequilla de cacahuate (mani)!”
“Michael no come nada verde, sólo por el color.”
“Los plátanos solían ser la comida favorita de Matt, ¡ahora ni siquiera los toca!”

Puede ser que su hijo coma sólo ciertos tipos de alimentos o que rechace alimentos por tener cierto color o textura. Puede ser que también jueguen en la mesa y no quieran comer. No se preocupe si su hijo es quisquilloso con la comida. El comportamiento caprichoso con la comida es común en muchos niños de 2 a 5 años de edad. Mientras su hijo tenga suficiente energía y esté creciendo, es muy probable que él o ella esté consumiendo lo suficiente para mantenerse saludable. Si tiene alguna preocupación acerca del crecimiento o el comportamiento alimenticio de su hijo, hable con el médico de su hijo.

Cómo lidiar con los caprichos al comer

Los caprichos al comer de su hijo son temporales. Si no les da mucha importancia, terminarán generalmente antes de la edad escolar. Pruebe los siguientes consejos para ayudarle a lidiar con el comportamiento caprichoso con la comida de su hijo de una manera positiva. Marque los que funcionen para usted y su hijo.

- **Deje que sus hijos sean “recolectores de frutas y vegetales.”**
  Permitáles escoger las frutas y vegetales en la tienda.

- **Haga que su hijo le ayude a preparar las comidas.**
  Los niños aprenden acerca de la comida y se entusiasman para probar los alimentos cuando ayudan a preparar la comida. Permitáles añadir ingredientes, lavar verduras, o ayudar a mezclar la comida.

- **Ofrezca opciones.** En lugar de preguntar “¿Quieres cenar brócoli?”, pregunte “¿Qué quieres cenar, brócoli o coliflor?”

- **Disfruten de la compañía mutua mientras comen en familia.**
  Hable acerca de temas felices y divertidos. Si las comidas son momentos para discusiones familiares, su hijo puede adoptar una actitud poco saludable hacia la comida.

- **Ofrezca la misma comida a toda la familia.** No sea un “cocinero de comida rápida,” preparando una comida distinta para su hijo. Su hijo estará bien aún si él o ella no come de vez en cuando.
Probar alimentos nuevos

Puede ser que su hijo no quiera probar alimentos nuevos. Es normal que los niños rechacen comida que nunca antes han probado. Estos son unos consejos para convencer a su hijo a probar alimentos nuevos:

- **Porciones pequeñas, grandes beneficios.** Permita que sus hijos prueben porciones pequeñas de alimentos nuevos que usted disfrute. Déle una probadita primero y sea paciente con ellos. Cuando desarrollen un gusto por más tipos de alimentos, es más fácil planear las comidas familiares.

- **Ofrezca sólo un nuevo alimento a la vez.** Sirva algo que usted sepa que le gusta a su hijo junto con la comida nueva. Ofrecer más alimentos nuevos a la vez puede ser demasiado para su hijo.

- **Dé un buen ejemplo.** Pruebe nuevos alimentos por sí mismo. Describa su sabor, textura y olor a su hijo.

- **Ofrezca los alimentos nuevos primero.** Su hijo tiene más hambre al inicio de la comida. Algunas veces, toma tiempo adaptarse a los nuevos alimentos.

- **Algunas veces, toma tiempo adaptarse a los nuevos alimentos.** A los niños no siempre les gustan los alimentos nuevos enseguida. Ofrezca comidas nuevas muchas veces. Puede tomarle muchos intentos antes de que un niño acepte un alimento nuevo.

¡Haga que la comida sea divertida!

¡Ayude a su hijo desarrollar hábitos saludables de comida haciendo que participe y haciendo la comida divertida! Sea creativo en la cocina con estas ideas geniales. Marque las que intenta en su casa, ¡y asegúrese de añadir sus propias ideas también!

- **Corte los alimentos en formas fáciles y divertidas con cortadores de galletas.**

- **Anime a su hijo a inventar y ayudar a preparar nuevos bocadillos.** Cree sabores nuevos combinando aderezos o dips bajos en grasa con verduras. Pruebe con hummus (paté de garbanzo) o salsa como dip para verduras.

- **Ponga nombre a la comida que su hijo le ayude a crear.** Concédale gran importancia al hecho de servir “la ensalada de María” o “las batatas de Peter” a la hora de la cena.

- **Ideas de nuestra familia para hacer la comida divertida:**

  ___________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________
  ___________________________________________________________

Para recibir más consejos en este y otros temas, visite: [ChooseMyplate.gov/preschoolers/](https://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/)