

Etiquette for Picky Eaters

By Christine Chen

Dear Ms. Chen,

I have always known that my kids were picky eaters. It didn't seem like a big problem to me because I fix the food I know they like and they eat it. However, as they are getting older and are being invited to their friend's for sleepovers, I am realizing that this picky eating thing is not such a good thing. In fact, after my oldest son, who is twelve, spent the night at his friend's home a few weeks ago, I was embarrassed to find out that his friend's mom had a hard time finding something for my son to eat. I was told that he would only eat macaroni and cheese the entire time. He apparently turned up his nose at the rest of the food. I am embarrassed and I am sure my son offended his hostess. I want him to send a thank you note to his friend for the invitation, but I also would love to help my children behave in a polite way when served food they don't like. Please help!

—Sandy

Dear Sandy,

First, let me say I'm thrilled that your son will be sending a thank you note. There is nothing like getting a thank you note in the mail, especially from a child. And, the fact that people just don't send notes very often anymore makes it that much more special.

Now, for the picky eating problem. I do understand that there are certain foods that none of us like. However, it is never polite for a child, or an adult for that matter, to publicly announce when the brussel sprouts are being passed around the table—"Yuck! Brussel sprouts! I hate brussel sprouts!" I have had my own children's friends sit at my table and do just that when served something they didn't like. And, I'm willing to bet that many other moms who have experienced the same thing, just like me, smile through clenched teeth and ask, "Well, is there something else I can get you?"

Doubtlessly, even the most well-round-



ed eaters will be resistant to a few foods at which times a simple, "No thank you (without wrinkling his nose)," would be an adequate refusal. Many children don't realize the effort that goes into preparing a meal and they don't realize the great joy it brings a cook to hear how wonderfully delicious the food tastes. It's all about respect.

Our children should be taught to be aware of the feelings of others and to look for opportunities to show appreciation. I know from experience, if my son's friend chooses not to eat the scalloped potatoes (without saying "yuck" or turning up his nose) that I worked so hard to prepare, but raves about my lemon-dill salmon—well then, all is forgiven. That child will certainly get another invitation to visit.

Perhaps the problem began much earlier when you began making a special menu for your children. Normal eating habits are crucial for both good health and long-term social acceptance. Here are a few tips to help expand your children's menu:

- Take them grocery shopping with you.

Allow them to choose some exotic fruit or vegetable to try.

- Look through cookbooks together. Let them choose something that looks good and then let them help prepare it.
- Introduce ethnic foods by taking them to an interesting, ethnic restaurant. What child can resist a hibachi where the chefs are offering tricks and jokes while cooking? Follow up with a special dinner once a week where you try something new or go with a themed dinner—Chinese, Italian, Mexican.
- Invite grandparents to come for a special meal.
- Grow a vegetable or fruit garden with your children. Let them help select what you'll grow and harvest to include with your meals.

If children are involved in meal preparations, they will not only become more interested in trying new and exciting foods, but they will also understand the time and effort it takes to prepare a meal. They, in turn, will understand and be more respectful to others who prepare a meal for them. So, start cooking—together! ☺