

Hi there! You're listening to episode #5 of the In the Kitchen with Cook Smarts podcast. I'm Jess Dang the Founder of Cook Smarts and I'm here to help you become a more confident and organized cook in the kitchen.

Today, I'm tackling a big emotional topic for a lot of parents -- how to help your picky eaters become adventurous, curious eaters.

I could talk about this one forever. It's clearly a topic I care deeply about not just as a mom but as someone who really believes that cooking and health education starts at home and should be as important as teaching our kids how to read or how to use their manners. I've read lots about this topic and have two great test subjects to experiment on, and I'm excited to share my personal experience in today's episode because man, parenting is hard!

But before we dive in, a little plug for our meal plan service, which has created lots of curious eaters. So instead of stressing out at 4PM about, "What the heck am I going to make for dinner," we help busy parents figure out the answer week after week. Because you get a new menu delivered to your inbox every week, you'll never get stuck in a food rut, which helps your dear little ones discover lots of different new foods. Yes, they may not love everything, but trying new things is an important part of life and we make it easy peasy for you to help your kids (and yourself) do just that. If you're not a member, head over to [cooksmarts.com](https://cooksmarts.com). You can start for free with no payment info required.

And now back to the magic solutions you've been waiting for.

So before we dive into magic solutions, I wanted to give you all some context for where my kids are and the picky stages we've gone through. As of the taping of this podcast, I have a 3.5 year old daughter and almost 2 year old son. I'm also 33 weeks pregnant with my 3rd, so by the time this podcast airs, I will have a third test subject to work on.

Now just because their mom owns a meal planning company doesn't mean that my kids are any different than any other kid. We struggle with the same challenges most busy families face. We do not eat gourmet meals. They love French Fries and plain bread just as much as the next kid.

However, I feel really lucky because for the most part, they've been fairly curious, eager eaters. Now I don't know if this is because of what we've done or if they're naturally just like this. The more time I spend around kids, I do believe nature drives a lot of who your kids are but it doesn't mean that we can't help direct them to have good habits, and I do think curious, adventurous eating is a habit that can be taught and practiced.

So even though my kids have been pretty good eaters, they're kids, which means they're fickle, and we've definitely gone through many picky eating phases where they won't try anything new or are very limited in what they will eat. I feel like my daughter is going through one right now where she really just wants to eat plain carbs, like white rice and naan, and is not interested in a

whole lot else but I'm just sticking to the strategies I'll share with you today, and I know we'll get back to a better pattern.

Now if extreme pickiness is a chronic issue in your household or if you have older kids where you're really worried that they're exhibiting a pattern of disordered eating and you're really concerned about their nutritional intake and emotional relationship with food, please do talk to a doctor and seek professional help in this area. I'd love for you to continue to listen to the episode and see if you pick up any new tips, but I would say my experience and these strategies probably more addresses the average versus the extremes of picky eating. If you're not sure where your child falls, you'll probably get a better sense after listening to this episode.

Alright, now let's get into the good stuff.

So, I've had so many parents message me feeling really defeated about dealing with their picky eater, and instead of getting into tactical, this is what we're going to do mode, I find that it works best to start with us and our internal mindset first because I believe that so much of staying sane as a parent really is about adopting the right mindset about the constant changing barrage of challenges we face.

First, I want you to accept that it's not you and really remind yourself that picky eating is a perfectly normal part of growing up. Yes, there are those unicorn parents out there who say, "My kids eat everything! They've never been picky!" but I want to remind you those parents are very much in the minority.

Most kids go through a or many picky eating phases, because it's just a part of evolution. I don't know why nature is this way but all those dark green vegetables that are good for us like kale, brussels sprouts, and broccoli also have a bitter undertone, and our cavemen brain tell us that bitter could equal poison so it's natural that we don't want to eat these things. Like wouldn't it be great if kale tasted like a chocolate chip cookie and a chocolate chip cookie tasted like kale? I'm sure the food scientists are working on this, but at the moment, we just have to consider this another parenting responsibility.

Plus, saying no is also a huge part of their development is little individuals realize they can assert their own will some of the time. It sucks to hear no from your kid but what they choose to eat is one of the few areas your kid has some decision making control in their very controlled lives.

So the next time your kid is saying, "No," take a breath and remember, it's not you and that somehow both their caveperson and highly-evolved brain is telling them to say no.

The second area where I want to help all of us parents shift our mindset is to ditch the battling or fighting vocabulary. So much of what's written on the web or books written about this topic uses phrases like "battling picky eating." Even when I was first creating this episode, I titled it tips for

battling picky eating, so I clearly still need to work on this too. If we view it as a fight, then our kids will view it as a fight. Kids can sense our antagonism and that can really affect how they react to our very well-intentioned efforts. So let's not think about this as a me vs. them problem. So the conclusion: let's reframe picky eating not as a problem we have to fight but think of it as healthy eating skills we get to teach our kids about.

The third area where we can shift our mindset is just resetting our expectations and what success looks like. I am totally a Type A person, and one of the biggest challenges I face as a parent is not to bring that part of my personality into my parenting. Even though I so want the A+ and have my kid eat 3 great meals a day that are packed with tons of veggies and have them say no to all those processed snacks, I just don't think that's a realistic goal, and it would set me up for disappointment in myself and maybe even my kids and that would just suck.

One of my pediatrician friends told me that especially with young kids, like toddler to preschool age, expect just 1 good meal a day. Your kid won't starve themselves and they'll respond to what their body needs. When they're going through a growth spurt, they'll eat more, but for the most part if you get 1 good meal a day, you've done your job.

Knowing that, my goal now really is about exposure right now. I just want them to be exposed to as many ingredients, flavors and textures as possible. One of my favorite books from the last few years was Bee Wilson's *First Bite: How We Learn to Eat*, and she talks about how important early exposure to all of those things are. Even if kids go through later picky stages, there's almost like a sensory memory established in those early days that can bring us back to better habits.

So now I don't focus on quantity or even ratio, meaning that if my kid eats 1 huge bowl of rice but then takes 1 bite of chicken and broccoli, I'll consider that success. I know it sounds like "Jess, you're just telling me to really lower my expectations" and I am. You are of course allowed to set higher expectations for yourself and your kid and that's totally up to you but I do invite you to examine if your current expectations might be the source of a lot of your frustration.

And the last area where I've really shifted my mindset that has made such a difference is practicing Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility. Ellyn Satter is a multi-hyphenate in the world of child development. She's a dietician, a social worker, child development expert, and many other things but she's honestly just a breath of zen and reason in a space that I feel like has a lot of hmmm, might we say high-pressure, judgy advice.

She has a great website, which I'll link to, and lots of helpful books, but the basic gist of the Division of Responsibility is you as a parent are responsible for providing nutritious meals at regular, established times every day. Your child's responsibility is to decide what they want to eat and how much they want to eat. I will repeat this another way because I think this is so revolutionary. Your job is to provide good food on a consistent schedule every day. Your kids job is to eat if they want to. That's all. It's so simple yet so many parents don't realize this. Most of

us believe it's also our responsibility to get or make our kids to eat the food and just taking that away makes such a huge difference in your mental state when you set that food on your dining table.

At that point, you've done your job. Your kids are not going to starve themselves and if they're truly hungry, they will eat. You can of course do other things to create an inviting environment at that dining table (which of course we'll talk about next) but you don't need to force your kids to eat the food. That's their job.

Hopefully these mindset shifts whether you adopt 1 or all of them can help us relax a little bit around the table, because all of us parents can use a bit more relaxation in our lives, right?

Ok, now that we've gotten zen, let's talk magical tactical solutions. So first, are these really magical, sure-to-work solutions? No, if they were, I'd be like a gazillionaire mom influencer on Instagram but I'm definitely not that. So much of parenting is just throwing spaghetti at the wall and trying new things and what might work for one kid won't work for another kid and what might work today may not work tomorrow. Don't you love that? Isn't that just the best part of parenting?

So let's dive into the 12 solutions I've tried and used in my kitchen with my 2 test subjects.

#1, and I honestly think this one is the most important and also perhaps the hardest to do. Don't only offer your kids the foods they love and try to avoid offering something they love at every meal. A common parent lament I hear all the time is my kid only eats pizza, chicken tenders and buttered pasta, and when I ask, well do you usually only offer your kids those options and the answer often is yes.

I totally get why we do it. We don't want to waste our time and money making something they may reject, it hurts when our kids say no, and we of course want them to eat something, and the best way to do that is by offering them something they love. But then we get into this loop where we're not exposing them to anything new and just reinforcing their picky habits by offering them only the pizza, chicken tenders, and buttered pasta. And if every meal has one of those items, they're most likely going to fill up on that.

I remember when my daughter was probably a little over a year old and just loved string cheese, so I started offering her string cheese every day because it was so cute seeing her eat it. I was a first time mom and these were things that I melted my heart -- my husband tells me that he's never seen anyone who gets such joy from watching their kids eat. However, it became a bit of a problem because of course she filled her tummy first with the string cheese and then wasn't as open to other things. Finally I just had to cut her off and when that was no longer a choice, she did start to become more open to new things.

So even if your kid is going through a really picky phase where they want to eat just a few limited things, be strong and stay the course. Continue to offer them a wide variety of items. As we talked about earlier with mindset shifts, accept that the rejection is normal and it has nothing to do with you. Remember your job is to offer a wide variety of nutritious meals, their job is to decide what they'll eat and how much.

If you are really worried that your kid will refuse everything and just starve, take a suggestion from Dina Rose. She's the author of "It's Not About the Broccoli" and she says if you have to offer a backup, make sure it's something that your kid doesn't love so not the pizza, chicken tenders, or buttered pasta, for example. If they know that's an option, they'll always hold out for it. We've definitely tried this in the past and will offer something like yogurt, which my kids usually feel neutral about but aren't crazy for. But really these days, in practicing the Division of Responsibility, we just accept that they might just decide not to eat and that's ok. They are lucky to be first world kids and will not starve.

#2 The second tactic that's worked really for us is minimizing processed, convenience snacks. In our house, that's like the Goldfish, pretzels, chips, that type of thing. This isn't so much about not filling my kids up during snack time but the fact that they just seem to get more addicted to the processed stuff and then are always asking for "snack food" at the dinner table, which is so very annoying as a parent. I mean, I've just cooked this homemade dinner and you want eat pretzels instead?

I know that there are so many snack options these days for kids, some that even market themselves as healthy by being made of kale or sauerkraut but I think snack foods are just snack foods. They're mostly made by big food companies, and their job is to figure out how to entice our taste buds. We love them because they're convenient and easy to take on the go but I've really tried hard to switch to whole foods like nuts, veggies, yogurt, or cheese and offering them in very limited volume so that we really don't fill up on them. That doesn't mean that we don't do the Goldfish or processed stuff either. I just will put 8 to 10 in a small container vs. filling up those whole snack cups (we've all seen them - they're the ones where kids can reach their hand into them but they also can't spill) and getting that little sample seems just as satisfying to my kids. They're hungrier during real meal times and also don't get as whiny about, "Why can't I have snack food instead?"

#3 Ok, strategy #3. We cook meals that my husband and I want to eat, meaning I don't do a separate meal for the kids. One of the ideas I've really tried to promote through Cook Smarts' meal plan service is there is no such thing as kids food. If we keep pushing that there is this idea of kids food and adults food, we're almost encouraging kids to be picky. So many of our members are often surprised by what their kids will try and love, like mussels for instance. Every time it comes up on a menu, so many parents post in our Facebook group, my kid loved the mussels. That is something that will never show up on a kids menu at any restaurant, but you'd be shocked by how much kids love that tactile activity involved in eating them.

By cooking meals we love, we get excited about the meals, and I feel like our kids can sense that. If we eat the meal with gusto, they are more likely to try it, and also see that a lot of eating is about enjoyment too and not just pressure.

#4 And speaking of pressure, creating a no-pressure environment is the 4th strategy I wanted to share, and it's one that's worked really well for us. In honoring the Division of Responsibility, we've tried really hard not to resort to any sort of forceful tactics at the dining table. Basically this is how dinner goes for us.

I tell my kids, "It's dinner time. Come wash your hands!" and while they're doing that, I set out the food family style, and I sit down and serve myself. I tell them what is in the various bowls or plates and let them serve themselves or if they need help, I'll serve them, but I always err on the side of less, especially if it's something they've never seen before. Not seeing a huge mound of something new definitely lessens their fear of trying it.

And if we're having something like soup where there's a bunch of ingredients already mixed together, I will spoon it for them but then tell them that they can eat around what they don't like or take out anything they don't like.

By shifting control to them and not making a big deal about the food, I've found dinner time to be much more enjoyable for everyone.

Yes, there are meals when my kids take 2 bites and walk away or say they don't like what I've made, and I tell you it hurts, but to me the no-pressure environment is about playing the long game. They understand that sitting down at the table doesn't equal a battle, and come to dinner a bit more open to the experience.

This does take practice and again a huge internal mindshift that I've had to make, but try practicing with snacks first. Make a really pretty snack platter with nuts, vegetable crudites, fruit, and maybe some dips like hummus or yogurt and just leave it out at the kitchen counter. You can start nibbling at it, but don't even bother inviting your kids to try it, and I bet you your kids may just start following your lead. It's a bit like playing hard to get, and often it works.

#5 Strategy #5. While I do try to make dinner as low pressure as possible, I will ask my kids to try one bite of everything, especially if it's something new. So if they didn't serve themselves a little bit of everything, I will ask, do you want to try 1 bite of these sweet carrots? If they say no, I leave it be and continue to model good eating myself. Sometimes they change their mind when they see that I'm enjoying the meal, but not always.

A lot of our meal plan embers have a firmer 1 bite rule at their table, and that's totally up to you. I do find that that first bite is the biggest hurdle. If you can get your kids to try that first bite, you've hit the goal of exposing them to something new. Sometimes they even decide that they

like it and will have more. But if that one bite is all you get, based on my new adjusted expectations, I still consider that success.

#6 The next strategy, strategy #6, is to pair foods that your kids like less with flavors or ingredients they love. If your kids love ketchup, use it to help them get over the hump of trying something new. You can say, I've roasted some carrots. Would you like that with or without ketchup?

We all have a fridge full of condiments that could get more use so go beyond the ketchup. My kids also love sour cream and balsamic dressing as dippers too. And don't worry if it doesn't make sense to you. The point is to pair something your kid loves and is familiar with with something that's new to them and to make things taste better.

And another way I do that is just a sprinkle of brown sugar. So if I'm roasting brussels sprouts or broccoli -- those bitter-tasting dark green veggies that we talked about earlier -- I'll add a sprinkle of brown sugar when they're hot out of the oven, and the sugar just melts into the veggies and offsets the bitterness. You of course can choose your sweetener of choice but again it's about pairing a taste that kids love with something that they might be adverse to. Like Mary Poppins says, "A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down."

As for ingredients my kids love, they love white rice and boxed mac 'n cheese, so I'll often make fried rice or mac 'n cheese but add some frozen peas or chopped up spinach. Yes, they complain, "Why can't we just have this plain?" but usually they want the white rice or the mac 'n cheese bad enough that they'll eat whatever else I put into it.

Now the next 3 strategies are all about introducing an element of play and fun into your meals.

So #7, I totally encourage my kids to play with their food, and so long as they're not throwing it or wasting it purposely, anything goes. And often I'm the one who initiates the play when they're slow to warm to a meal. It's often like the ice breaker we use to get dinner started.

So I might start slurping green beans or making them into mustaches. Lining up beans into a long caterpillar. Arranging my broccoli into a big tree. Eating my spinach and then showing off my muscles. Or pretending to be an animal and eating my carrots like a bunny rabbit.

They'll often copy me and then I'll ask, who can make their caterpillar disappear the fastest? Or who's the hungriest rabbit? And they get so excited to make their caterpillar disappear or munch on their carrots. Yes, I know this might not be the most mindful eating and we have a lot to work on with our table manners, but they're still young and my goal for kids their age really is about exposure. I'm sure in a few years we will work on more refined table manners but now, I do want them to think of dinner as a fun activity.

Strategy #8. Another way to incorporate play and fun into your meal is by incorporating learning at the dinner table. Clearly this varies by age but there are so many ways to get creative here. Right now my older one is practicing her counting and we're also introducing some really simple arithmetic to her at dinner. So we'll ask her to count the number of broccoli pieces on each person's plate. Who has the most? If we all eat 2, how many will be left.

Dinner time is also a great time to introduce new vocabulary words to your kids. We have a Top Chef Inspired Sensory Game that comes with a bunch of adjective cards you can use to describe the food you're eating, and I'll make sure to link to that in the show notes.

We also have an Ingredient BINGO game that folks can download to help kids identify the vegetables that they're eating.

With older kids, there is so much science in food that you can talk about photosynthesis, heat transfer, proteins and nutrients. These days with the web, there are so many resources out there and lots of people homeschooling but even if you're not homeschooling, you can still borrow a lesson that's appropriate for your kid.

And of course it's not just about academic learning. The dinner table is a perfect setting to learn more about your family history, and we have a great download that features 50 questions that your kids can ask you to learn more about their family.

The last play and fun strategy, strategy #9 is making the meal the back drop some times. Now we don't do this every night because I do want my kids focused on eating first but every once in awhile they might be in the middle of play and need some help transitioning to dinner. So it's not about distraction but making a smoother transition to eating because we all know transitions can be tough for children.

We'll read, color, build blocks or even play a simple board game. This usually is just for the first part of the meal and we sort of taper the activity to focus on more on food but again it helps to create a no pressure environment, and your kids might be more open to trying something if they're also coloring or associating the food with something fun they're doing. We might do the meal outside, especially if they were already playing outside, and honestly I think everything is easier when kids are outside.

If you don't like this idea for dinner because you want your kids really focused on eating, that's totally understandable but try doing this for snack time instead.

The last strategy - strategy #10 -- that's helped my kids become more curious eaters is one of the most obvious, and that's also why I wanted to end with it. Just include your kids in the process!



I have a ton of suggestions here, enough for its own podcast episode, which we'll definitely do in the future. Clearly getting your kids to help you prep or cook is a great way to teach them about the foods that they're eating. It doesn't necessarily always translate to them eating it but it of course, never hurts. Plus they're practicing motor skills and learning important knife skills.

Some parents forget that your kids can also be involved in the before and after process too. A lot of our meal plan members will show their kids the menu for the week, and they get to provide input into what they want to eat for the week. Kids get so little control of their meals that letting them offer their opinion in the meal planning process can go a long way.

Then afterwards, the whole family can rate the meal, and that's another opportunity for them to offer their opinion and be involved in the process. And of course, they can't rate the meal unless they've eaten at least some of the meal so that can be another incentive to get them to try the meal.

Phew. So there we have it. I know that helping a child get out of their picky eating phase can be so frustrating for a parent but as you can see there are so many ways to help them and yourself through this process. As parents if we can start with some of the mindset shifts I mentioned, we'll be in a much better place to then help our kids realize that they're fully capable of enjoying all the wonderful foods you want to provide them. The 10 strategies I offered have all worked well for us. If there's something else that's worked really well for your family, please do share so we can help more parents out. Just head to our show notes at [cooksmarts.com/podcast/5](https://cooksmarts.com/podcast/5) and leave your comments there. And if you try any of these strategies with success, please let us know there too!

Before I sign off, I just want to say I know that every parent who is listening to this podcast is trying to do the best thing for their kids. I just want to reassure you and tell you that you are doing a great job because parents don't hear that enough. Be patient with yourself and be patient with your kids. When I'm feeling extra frustrated, I think about all the adults I know who were super picky as kids, including my brother, and now are totally enthusiastic eaters as adults and it just helps me to stop worrying so much. The habits you're encouraging today is about the long game. I think so long as you remain an gentle advocate for exposure and healthy eating, you are doing everything you need to be doing as a parent, and I am so honored I get to be here to support you.

We are definitely a very new podcast, so please help us spread the word. If you have a friend or a family member who is struggling with picky eating, forward this episode to them! They will thank you, I promise.

And if you can do me a favor and leave a review on iTunes, that will help more people discover this show, which means we will create lots more smart, organized, and confident cooks in the world!

Lastly, if you're not a member of our award winning meal plan service yet, sign up at [cooksmarts.com](https://cooksmarts.com). We have so many delicious meals to help expose your kids to a wide variety of foods.

Until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader!