

Picky, Picky

Why your kids won't eat *anything*, and why it doesn't matter.

BY ANN HODGMAN

My kids are worse eaters than yours. That's something we can disagree on right away—because I know that right now you're saying, "My kids won't eat anything. I'm serious. Nothing."

This statement always gets my attention. I've never seen a child who won't eat anything. Okay, you admit, your children do eat a couple of things. But only plain pasta . . . nothing green . . . only hot dogs . . . nothing that touches anything else . . . nothing "hot and

mixed," as my nephews used to say (referring to lasagna).

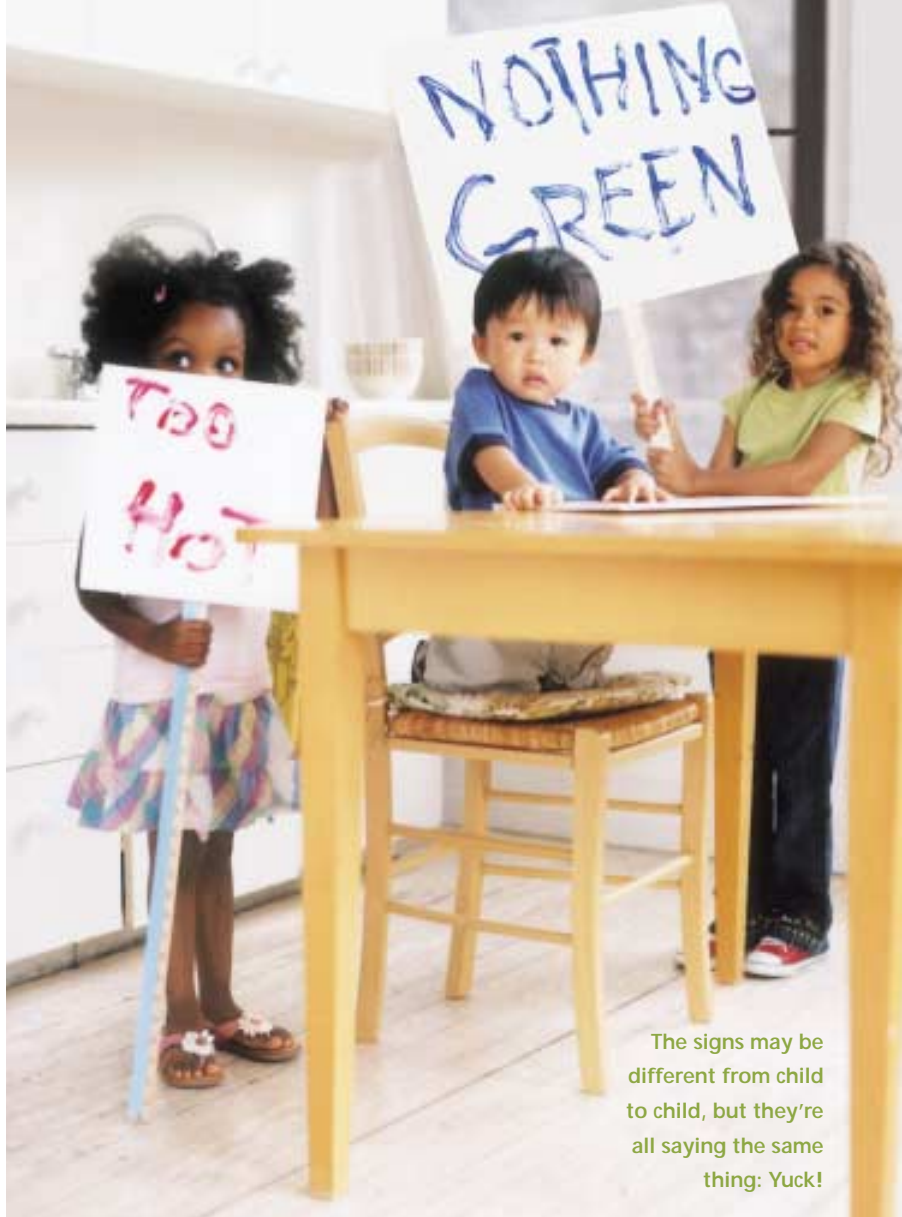
I've seen it all. I know a girl who won't touch bread except as a handle for meat; after eating the meat, she throws the bread away. The brother of a friend wouldn't eat anything red, including cherry Life Savers. The child of another friend even refused ice cream. "Too cold," he said.

Why, Oh Why?

Many children are astoundingly picky. I'm glad I'm not a

pediatrician, because now I can spout off a lot of theories about why, and no one can hold me to them, though I'm sure I'm right:

It seems to me that when babies become toddlers, the household feeding dynamic changes dramatically. Parents go from spoon-feeding their child and applauding every bite ("She ate all her strained beets today!") to pulling the high chair up to the family table and expecting their toddler to eat along with them—to eat



The signs may be different from child to child, but they're all saying the same thing: Yuck!

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when and what the rest of the family is eating. Accordingly, parents start urging their kids to eat more foods, in more varieties, lots faster—which, naturally, the toddler resists.

Added to that is the fact that for some reason, babies' taste buds seem to change and become much more selective as they approach toddlerhood. I suspect this trait evolved from caveman days: A mobile toddler could have wandered away from her parents and eaten potentially dangerous food—deadly roots and berries and so on—instead of sitting still and eating what her parents fed her. Whatever the reason, the dreaded taste metamorphosis happens as kids approach the 18-month stage, and that beet-eater is no more.

Give 'Em What They Want

These days, no matter how busy they are, American parents tend to prepare extra food if their children don't like the meal they're being offered. ("You hate chicken all of a sudden? Okay, I'll make you a toaster waffle.") I grew up with the "eat what's on your plate" rule. My mother, who had four children and a limited budget, wasn't about to get

a bowl of cereal for someone who didn't like meat loaf. This policy made sense, but it also meant a lot of "just one bite" arguments. Hoping to avoid similar tension at my own table, I've prepared extra food for my kids countless times, resulting in a more peaceful meal but pickier children.

Frustrating Is an Understatement

"But it's so limiting!" parents will complain. "There are so many delicious foods that Jared won't even try! When he's a grown-up, he'll only like vanilla ice cream and peanut butter!"

Let's assume that's true. My daughter was a picky eater right up until college. As soon as she met kids who ate exotic foods like shrimp, she started eating everything she had refused to taste before. But say that little Jared still eats nothing but peanut butter and ice cream when he has grown up into big Jared. Isn't that Jared's concern, not yours? If you've offered him healthy, interesting foods, you've done your job. If he's continued to refuse them into adulthood, that was his choice.

One way or another, most of the kids most of us know manage to swallow enough calories to keep from wasting

away. Don't children mainly get colds and tummy upsets that are unrelated to their hatred of spinach? As long as you offer them what they need, along with a multivitamin and a source of calcium, they will get the right stuff. And over time—even if it happens too slowly to track—they will gradually allow more interesting items alongside the macaroni and cheese on their plates.

In the meantime, smile and ignore it as best you can.

RECIPES

Even when my own little darlings were spitting out food left and right, these recipes still passed the "edible" test.

Chip Chick

Serves 4

- 1½ lbs. skinless, boneless chicken breast
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup milk
- ¼ tsp. black pepper
- 2 (6-oz.) bags potato chips (you won't need them all, but you want a nice deep layer)

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Cut the chicken into fingers or nuggets. Beat together the egg, ►

Author of *One Bite Won't Kill You* and two other cookbooks, Ann Hodgman lives in Washington, CT, with her husband and two children, who, much to their mother's relief, have grown past the stage of picky eating.



What's for Dinner

milk, and pepper, and soak the chicken in it while you prepare the chips thus: Open the bags a teeny bit in one corner; then, with a rolling pin or skillet or unopened soda can or whatever you have on hand, crush the chips as fine as you can (kids can complete this job with great enthusiasm) and pour into a shallow baking dish.

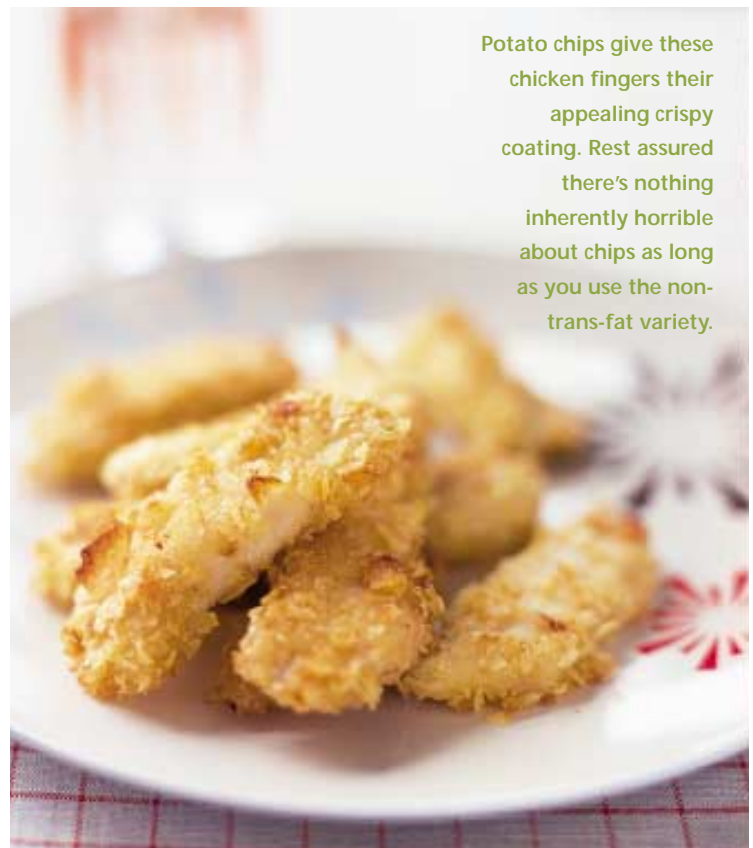
A few at a time, flop the chicken fingers around in the

potato chips until they're well coated. Put them on a baking sheet (ideally, one that's been covered with parchment paper, for easy cleanup) and bake for 10 minutes. Turn the chicken fingers over and bake for 10 more minutes. (You may have to stick them under the broiler for a minute or two if you want the coating more browned.)

Serve chicken with a dipping sauce, if you want.

WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU:

It's lucky that most kids will eat chicken, as poultry is a great source of protein, essential for building muscle and bone. And there's a bonus to the potato chip coating: no need to use additional oil on the baking sheet.



Potato chips give these chicken fingers their appealing crispy coating. Rest assured there's nothing inherently horrible about chips as long as you use the non-trans-fat variety.

One-Pot Spaghetti

Serves 4

- 2 tbsps. cooking oil
- 1/2 onion, minced
- 1/2 lb. ground turkey, beef, or sausage
- 1 tsp. dried basil
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- 1 (14-oz.) jar spaghetti sauce
- 1 (8-oz.) can tomato sauce
- 1/2 lb. dried pasta
- 2 cups water
- Grated Parmesan (optional)

In a large pot, heat the oil and sauté the onion until translucent. Add the meat and herbs and cook slowly, breaking up the lumps of meat with a spoon, until the meat is brown and cooked through. If you feel like it, drain off the fat. Add the spaghetti sauce, tomato sauce, and salt and pepper to taste, and cook, stirring, for a couple of minutes. Now add the pasta and the 2 cups of water and bring to a boil, stirring. Then lower the heat, cover the pot, and simmer for half an hour. (Stir frequently to make sure pasta doesn't scorch on the bottom.) If the mixture looks too dry, add up to half a cup of water. After half an hour, the pasta will be cooked through and the sauce thickened. Give it a final stir and serve with cheese.

WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU:

Don't fret if your kids are pasta-hounds—they need the carbs for energy and growth. And this recipe is chock-full of folate, essential for red blood cell production. ●●



Pasta is a mainstay of picky eaters. This one-pot recipe is destined to become a staple in the busy-mom repertoire—unless washing extra pots is your secret passion. The sauce is definitely milder than adult versions, and the pasta a bit softer, but hey, kids dig it.