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Published at <https://bestmedicineneeds.org/childrens-health/food-chaining-expand-childs-diet/>

Food Chaining Is a Simple Technique to Expand Your Child's Diet



Frustrated by your child's eating habits? Food chaining is a simple technique for picky eaters that creates links between a food your child likes and further dishes they might also enjoy. Here are some examples and how it might work for your picky eater.

You've tried everything, but your child's diet consists of exactly three things: chicken nuggets, the French fries next to the chicken nuggets, and an occasional dip into the ketchup with a French fry — and a chicken nugget, if your child is feeling cray-cray.

Sound familiar? Experts say parents shouldn't feel embarrassed, because having a child with a limited palette is not always about offering bad food choices; sometimes it's associated with a medical condition. And if you have a picky eater — whether verified by a dietitian or just casual observation — food chaining may be a solution.

“Food chaining is building off of foods your kids already eat to expand their accepted foods,” said Sarah Williams, MS, RDN, LD, Clinical Dietitian for [Renown Health](#). “You're essentially creating links between foods your kids like with new foods to diversify their palate. It's like how in Scrabble, you build off of letters to create new words — you're doing this with food.”

Food Chaining: How It Works

She cites the following example: You would love if your child would eat quiche, but that means pie crust — a foreign concept to your picky eater. Yet all he's ingesting right now is chocolate milk.

“It sounds like a stretch,” she explains. “But it's really fairly simple, and it can increase the number of foods your child eats fairly easily. For example, from chocolate milk, you go to Carnation Instant Breakfast. Then maybe they'll accept hot chocolate, because it's a similar flavor. From there, you can go to a chocolate milkshake, playing on the thickness and texture to slowly thicken it until they'll also try pudding. Then you can go to a chocolate pie, which gives them an introduction to pie crust.”

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Ultimately, you can even build to a whole-grain crust. “But you can't even begin to get there until they've accepted regular pie crusts,” Williams says. “It takes time and patience.”

Picky Eating, Defined

She notes that food chaining is a process recommended for picky eaters — which in medical terms, is a child who eats 30 or fewer foods. “Problem eater” is the next step, which is defined

as a child who eats 20 or fewer items. But the concepts can even work for parents who simply want to add some diversity to their child's menu.

Another food chaining example: Perhaps your child will only eat the aforementioned chicken nuggets with ketchup.

"Fish nuggets aren't all that different in taste or texture," she notes. "The next step after they've accepted the fish is to gradually decrease the amount of breading. Then perhaps you can go to a grilled chicken breast dipped in ketchup, or maybe even grilled fish.

Then she says you can decrease the sauce gradually, so they'll just accept the meat itself.

"The goal is to get the child to eat healthy and embrace a whole-foods based diet," she says. "But it's important to keep in mind, if your kid eats only junk, you won't be able to introduce peas and carrots the next day — this is very gradual. You have to leave them a trail of breadcrumbs, so to speak."

If you're interested in learning more about Food Chaining, Williams recommends the book ["Food Chaining: The Proven 6-Step Plan to Stop Picky Eating, Solve Feeding Problems, and Expand Your Child's Diet"](#) by Cheri Fraker, Mark Fishbein, Sibyl Cox, Laura Walbert.

Help for a Problem Eater

If you suspect your child's eating is problematic — if he or she is eating 30 different foods or fewer — then Renown has teams that can work with parents and their child to help evaluate and get to the root of the problem. This team will be led up by a primary care doctor or pediatrician, who will do a physical exam and order further testing or workups. He or she will then potentially consult with:

- a dietitian
- a speech language pathologist
- an occupational therapist

- a behavioral therapist

And the time to consult an expert is as early as possible, Williams adds.

“We want to catch any problems with eating as early as possible in children — the earlier the better,” she says. “We want to catch it before their growth starts to suffer, and of course we don’t want them malnourished. If your life seems to revolve around questions about what your child might eat today, it may be time to call in some help.”

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