

Suggest options, avoid power struggles when children refuse food

Yvette:

When it comes time to eat dinner, my 6-year-old son takes forever to eat. He complains that he doesn't like what we're having most of the time. He is still slow or not interested even when he likes what we serve. We have tried everything to speed up the process, including giving him a time limit, making him sit at the table until he is finished eating and taking his food away. Nothing seems to work. I have resorted to making him sit at the table until he is finished eating because he is at least "eating" and not going hungry.

Pam

Pam:

I consulted with Lynda Peel, manager of Clinical Nutrition at Columbus Children's Hospital.

"Wanting to be in charge of him or herself is the most common reason that a child becomes a picky eater," explains Lynda. Assuming there are no medical issues and your child is not losing weight, you should focus on allowing your child some control over what he eats — within established parameters. For example, instead of asking him what he would like to eat, suggest options on which both you and the child agree, and allow him to choose. Avoid power struggles with your child over food.

The Department of Clinical Nutrition at Columbus Children's Hospital developed the following tips:

- Set rules, and don't negotiate.
- Consider taste: Cut down on spices. Children have strong taste buds and may not like food that is too spicy.
- Use familiar flavors with new foods.
- Avoid snacks and beverages within two hours of meal time.
- Make meal time non-threatening; talk about things other than food.
- Don't allow the child to bring games or toys to the dinner table or watch TV.
- Keep portion size small rather than an adult-size portion.
- Offer new foods at non-meal times when there's less pressure to perform.

Families are encouraged to send their parenting questions concerning their children's challenging or difficult behavioral issues to Brown at columbusparent@thisweeknews.com or Columbus Parent, 670 Lakeview Plaza Blvd., Suite F, Worthington, OH 43085.

Be patient with him. He will eat when he is hungry. This is a common issue with children of this age.

Yvette:

My child is in kindergarten this year. Her teacher has sent letters home about her not being able to complete her work because she keeps talking to the other students. Then, the letter I received this week was about her being mean to the other students and telling them what to do. I have tried to explain to her that she should not be talking at all unless asked to or if she raises her hand to ask or tell her teacher something. My question to you is: What else should I do or say to help her understand what is expected of her?

Marlisa

Marlisa:

Kindergarten is a pretty exciting time for children. This is only October; I would not overreact to the teacher's comments just yet. Did your daughter go to preschool? If so, was it less structured than her current school? Is it possible that she is bored in class or just easily distracted? I suggest that you spend some time in the classroom observing your daughter. Once you have a sense of the class dynamics, you and the teacher should develop a plan of behavior for your child and agreed consequences.

Some children need time to adjust to the structure of a classroom. Keep your expectations for her behavior simple and concrete. Given her age, the consequences for behavior need to be immediate. Work with the teacher on a plan to immediately reinforce her behavior choices. Some plan ideas include either giving her a sticker when she has a good day and once she accumulates a certain number of stickers, you offer her a special treat or when she

does not behave in class, an immediate sanction of lost recess time or a short time out. Disciplining her at home — hours after the behavior occurred — will not be effective. Don't be too alarmed. It is early in her school career. She will get the hang of it soon. Consistency and reinforcement are key.

Yvette

Yvette:

My daughter will enter ninth grade next year and will be coming home to an empty house from 3-5:30 pm. What can I do to assure myself that she is busy during that time and not looking to get into trouble? Any ideas other than homework or chores?

Pam

Pam:

Find a school activity that your child will enjoy. Extracurricular activities are a great way for your daughter to become involved in high school and develop a positive peer group. If this doesn't interest her, perhaps she could volunteer at a local nonprofit or provide after-school supervision to children in the neighborhood.

I am not sure why homework or chores are not an option. Helping out around the house is a definite benefit to you. At 14, she should be able to start dinner or pick up around the house.

Also, developing good study habits is important as she begins her freshman year.

Yvette



Yvette McGee Brown is a former Domestic Relations/Juvenile Court Judge. She is currently the president of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy at Columbus Children's Hospital.