

The Picky Eater Mealtime Script

What to say when your child refuses to eat, and how to bring calm, confidence, and connection back to the table.

By Veronica La Marca, RD

Picky Eating Expert & Founder of @feedingpickykids

When your child refuses to try a new food...	
<p>✗ "Just try one bite and then you can be done."</p>	<p>✓ "You can eat it when you are ready, let's just explore it for now." → Removes pressure and encourages curiosity.</p>
<p>✗ "No dessert until you at least take one bite!"</p>	<p>✓ "Dessert is always part of the meal no matter what." → If you choose to serve dessert, this neutralizes dessert and keeps all food equal.</p>
<p>✗ "Come on, try it, it's not a big deal!"</p>	<p>✓ "This is something new, what does it remind you of?" → Shifts focus on curiosity, giving them control over how they engage.</p>
<p>✗ "Stop being so picky!"</p>	<p>✓ "It can take time to learn about new foods." → Encourages progress over perfection and builds confidence</p>

When your child says they aren't hungry...	
<p>✗ "You need to eat something!"</p>	<p>✓ "It's okay if your tummy isn't ready right now."</p>
<p>✗ "You just asked for food 5 minutes ago!"</p>	<p>✓ Offer a safe food on the plate so they can eat if they want to.</p>
<p>✗ "You can't be full – you haven't eaten yet!"</p>	<p>✓ Say: "This is dinner. The next time we'll eat is snack at ____." → Builds trust and reinforces structure without the drama.</p>

When your child refuses to sit at the table...	
<p>✗ "Sit down and eat, NOW!"</p> <p>✗ "If you get up again, that means you're done!"</p> <p>✗ "You need to sit until we tell you you can be excused!"</p> <p>✗ "No toys at the table!"</p>	<p>✓ "I want to spend time with you and hear about your day. Come sit with me!" → <i>Shifts the focus from control to connection, helping them transition calmly.</i></p> <p>✓ "It's okay to take a quick break, but is your tummy happy or are you still hungry?" → <i>Allows movement while keeping a structure so they don't feel trapped or rushed.</i></p> <p>✓ "Let's make a mealtime routine and try setting a timer?" → <i>Sitting for long periods is hard for young kids, and forcing it increases resistance. The timer makes it more predictable.</i></p> <p>✓ "Want to pick a dinner buddy (stuffed animal) to sit with us?" → <i>A familiar toy or stuffed animal can help with the transition and make sitting at the table feel fun.</i></p>

When your child asks for dessert before dinner...	
<p>✗ "If you're asking for dessert, you must be hungry – eat your meal first!"</p> <p>✗ "No broccoli, no dessert!"</p> <p>✗ "Not until you finish your dinner!"</p>	<p>✓ "It makes sense to want dessert – it's delicious!" → <i>Validates their desire without moralizing the food. Acknowledgement builds trust and trust builds better eaters.</i></p> <p>✓ "All foods help your body in different ways." → <i>Teaches that dessert isn't just better – it's just one part of the picture.</i></p> <p>✓ "Dessert is part of the meal. You get to choose what you eat first." → <i>Neutralizing sweets takes the power away – so they stop obsessing and start learning balance.</i></p>

✗ Instead of telling them "3 more bites"...	
<p>✗ "You need to eat more – you barely had anything!" → <i>Why it backfires: Pressure shuts down their appetite and increases resistance.</i></p> <p>✗ "Just 3 more bites and then you're done!" → <i>Why it backfires: makes eating feel like a task to complete – not something to explore.</i></p> <p>✗ "You can't be full already!" → <i>Why it backfires: undermines their body awareness and builds frustration.</i></p> <p>✗ "You won't grow big and strong without eating more!!" → <i>Why it backfires: adds guilt and stress to the eating experience.</i></p>	<p>✓ "Listen to your tummy – do you feel full or still a bit hungry?" → <i>It supports internal cues instead of external demands.</i></p> <p>✓ "You don't have to finish it – just stay at the table with us. We want to hear about your day!" → <i>Reduces pressure, supports mealtime connection.</i></p> <p>✓ "This is our mealtime – next chance to eat is snack time." → <i>Reinforces structure and allows autonomy within boundaries.</i></p> <p>✓ "Mealtime is almost over, check in with your tummy before we're all done" → <i>Gives a gentle reminder without pressure or force.</i></p>

When your child has a meltdown at mealtime...	
<p>✗ "If you don't stop crying you are done!"</p> <p>✗ "You're overreacting – it's just food."</p> <p>✗ "Fine. I'll just make you something else."</p>	<p>✓ "Let's take a few deep breaths together. I'm here with you." → <i>Regulates child's nervous system and reminds them you're on their team.</i></p> <p>✓ "You're having a hard time with this food today. That's okay." → <i>Validates the feeling and keeps the moment safe and grounded.</i></p> <p>✓ "This is what we are having and there's something on your plate I think you'll like." → <i>Keeps boundaries firm while offering reassurance.</i></p>

When your child refuses to eat their safe foods...	
<p>❌ Don't panic or immediately offer a backup.</p> <p>❌ Don't pressure them to just eat the one thing they like.</p> <p>❌ Don't take it away immediately.</p>	<p>✅ "That's okay. You can leave it there, the next time we will eat it is at snack/dinner time." → <i>Reinforces structure and trust.</i></p> <p>✅ "Sometimes we are not in the mood for some food. That happens." → <i>Helps them connect with body cues, reduces shame, and keeps the table a safe space.</i></p> <p>✅ Keep it on the plate/table with no pressure to eat. "You can eat it when you're ready or leave it there". → <i>Normalize that it's okay to refuse. They choose what and how much to eat.</i></p>

When your child is constantly asking for snacks...	
<p>Child: "I'm so hungry" (after they just ate lunch). ❌ " You're not actually hungry we just ate."</p> <p>Child: "I NEED a snack!" ❌ "No snacks or you won't eat dinner."</p> <p>Child: "Can I have cookies?!" ❌ " Fine, but only if you eat something healthy first."</p>	<p>✅ "We just had lunch not too long ago, so its not snack time yet, let's find an activity to do until then." → <i>Reinforces a structured mealtime schedule and sets boundaries.</i></p> <p>✅ "Dinner's almost ready so let's wait a few minutes. Then, we will eat together. " → <i>Removes pressure and makes dinner feel like a positive family experience instead of a rule.</i></p> <p>✅ "We have snack choices – do you want X or Y?" → <i>Keeps snacks balanced while giving them a sense of control.</i></p>

When your child is trying a new food...	
<p>✗ "Did you like it?"</p> <p>✗ "See, it's not that bad!"</p> <p>✗ "Fine, you don't have to eat it."</p> <p>✗ "Come on! Just take a bite. "</p>	<p>✓ "Wow, that was a brave try!" → <i>Focus on effort, not approval.</i></p> <p>✓ "What did you think? Was it salty, crunchy, soft?" → <i>Helps them process instead of feeling judged.</i></p> <p>✓ "It looks like you're not ready to try it yet. You can try it another time." → <i>Neutral reaction leads to less drama and less resistance next time.</i></p> <p>✓ "You can spit it out if you need to." → <i>Makes them more likely to taste it.</i></p>

When your child only wants to eat carbs and nothing else...	
<p>✗ "You need to eat some protein or veggies too!"</p> <p>✗ "You can't just eat bread for every meal!"</p> <p>✗ "That's not real food– you need to eat something healthier."</p>	<p>✓ "Carbs give your body energy. Other foods like the carrots on your plate help you see better in the dark." → <i>Keeps food neutral and sparks curiosity without shame.</i></p> <p>✓ "Bread is part of the meal. Let's explore what else is on the table." → <i>Encourages variety and curiosity without removing their safe food.</i></p> <p>✓ "All foods help our body in different ways– want to learn what this one does?" → <i>Educates without criticizing and gives them a sense of empowerment.</i></p>

When your child is done eating after 2 bites...	
<p>✗ "You've barely eaten anything. If you don't eat now, you won't get anything to eat until tomorrow."</p> <p>✗ "You barely tried your food. You won't grow big and strong if you don't eat".</p>	<p>✓ "Looks like your tummy is saying all done right now. Okay– we'll eat again at snack/dinner." → <i>Helps them trust their body and allows them to tune into their hunger and fullness cues long-term.</i></p> <p>✓ "Trying new food can take time. Let's explore it together!" → <i>Celebrates interaction instead of the outcome which reduces resistance.</i></p>

When your child wants to eat the same food everyday...	
<p>✗ "You can't have mac and cheese again."</p> <p>✗ "I'm not making that again."</p> <p>✗ "No, you need to eat something different."</p> <p>✗ "You have to eat what everyone else is eating."</p> <p>✗ "You're going to get sick of eating that!"</p>	<p>✓ "Mac and cheese is on the menu! Want to try a fun topping today? " → <i>Instead of taking the food away, you introduce a tiny, low pressure change.</i></p> <p>✓ "We'll have that soon! Tonight I'm making x for dinner". → <i>Reassure them their favourite food isn't gone and theyll have it soon.</i></p> <p>✓ "We can have mac and cheese again this week! Do you want x or y to go with it? " → <i>Gives them control and choice, and knowing their favourite is coming up soon.</i></p> <p>✓ "We're having a different accepted food tonight! Would you like it plain or with sauce?" → <i>Gives them a sense of familiarity with a safe food, while still keeping one family meal.</i></p> <p>✓ "You really love that right now. Let's try it a little differently today." → <i>It validates their preference while gently encouraging variety in a low-pressure way.</i></p>

When your child says "Eww, I don't like that!" before they've even tried it...

- ✓ "It's okay to feel unsure about new foods."
→ *Reduces pressure and keeps the door open instead of slamming it shut.*
- ✓ Use curiosity, not commands.
Try: "Do you think it's squishy or crunchy? Or "What colour do you think it is inside?"
→ *Gets them engaged with the food and sparks curiosity.*
- ✓ "You can smell it, does it have a big or small smell?"
→ *Exposure and exploration without pressure leads to more interaction over time.*
- ✓ Make them part of the decision-making.
Try: "Should we try this with a dip next time? Or "What do you think would make this better?"
→ *Builds familiarity and ownership always lowers resistance.*

✗ Instead of asking them "Just try it!", say...

- ✓ "You can see if it feels soft or crunchy. "
→ *Gets them focused on their senses, not the pressure to take a bite.*
- ✓ "You can dip it in your sauce."
→ *Familiar flavours make new foods less scary.*
- ✓ "You can break it in half to see the inside."
→ *Gives them control and reduces the "unknown" factor.*
- ✓ "You can squish it with your finger. "
→ *Touch = learning. Hands-on exploration reduces fear.*
- ✓ "You can lick it to see what it tastes like."
→ *Tiny tastes build trust and familiarity.*
- ✓ "You can see if it's warm or cold".
→ *Temperature is a big sensory clue – let them explore it.*
- ✓ "You can put it on your bread like this."
→ *Mixing it with a safe food makes new textures acceptable.*

What to say when talking about your child's eating habits...	
<p>✗ About them: "She's just a picky eater."</p> <p>✗ To them: "You never like anything new."</p>	<p>✓ "She's still learning to feel comfortable with new foods."</p> <p>✓ "It takes time and practice to learn to like new foods – and that's okay." → <i>Small shifts like this build safety, not shame.</i></p>
When we call children "picky" they hear...	
<p>✗ "This is just who you are. "</p> <p>✗ "You don't like new things."</p> <p>✗ "There's something wrong with the way you eat".</p> <p>→ <i>Kids internalize that and instead of opening up, they shut down.</i></p>	

Need Personalized Support?

Mealtime scripts are a great start, but if you're ready for a personalized plan for your picky eater, I can help.

Veronica La Marca, RD

1:1 Coaching for Parents of Picky Eaters

 [Learn more about The Fight to Bite Method](#)

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