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Genetics and Jello: Is it Parents Who Create Picky or Adventurous Eaters?

Examining the nurture vs. nature question when it comes to food preferences in kids

By Carrie Anton



Hungry? How about pesto farro salad, pita bread paired with eggplant yogurt dip, warm French lentils,

zucchini butter toast, chicken tikka masala or deconstructed spiced sweet potato? Think this is the menu of a Seattle culinary hotspot? Think again. What sounds like elevated restaurant fare are just a few weeknight meal options for Minnesotans Sarah Yates-Cohen, Zach Cohen and 2-year-old Lola. Yates-Cohen is the head of the family's kitchen, but she is not a chef and has no culinary training; she's a stay-at-home mom who simply loves food.

Before Lola arrived, the Cohens ate out quite a bit. Now that Yates-Cohen is home and more meals are made there, she says, nutrition is foremost on her mind, especially with a second baby on the way. The family has switched to whole-wheat pasta and signed up for a CSA, which stands for community-shared agriculture. Local, in-season veggies have become a household mainstay. Yet even with these sophisticated and diverse food options, Yates-Cohen still classifies her toddler as an extremely picky eater.

"I used to think that if a kid was exposed to a wide variety of food, they would eat a wide variety of food," Yates-Cohen says. "Lola has proved me wrong."

The origins of pickiness

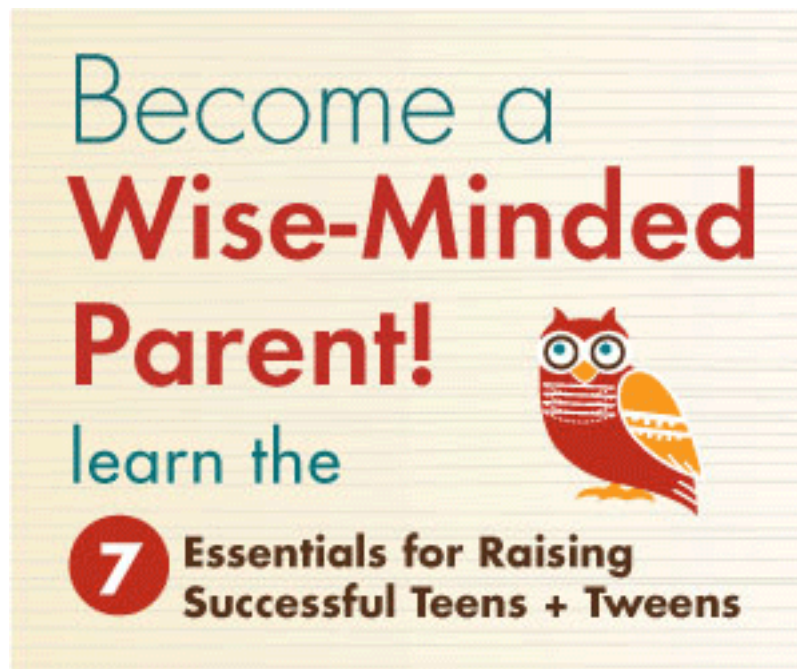
Is pickiness nurture or nature? That question was the focus of a 2014 study published in [The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition](#). The research looked at children and their food preferences to examine which was more dominant: nurture, by which the foods provided to a child help determine her dietary choices; or nature, by which a child's genetics determine what foods she will and will not eat.

The verdict: Nurture takes the lead. "Parents have a big part to play as they provide both genetic and environmental influences to their children," says Lucy Cooke, Ph.D., M.Sc., a research psychologist at University College London who helped to conduct this study.

The study's findings show that children are more genetically prone to taste preferences when it comes


to nutrient-dense foods — fruits, vegetables and proteins. For snacks, dairy and starches — foods largely responsible for weight gain — children’s preferences are more affected by their environment, particularly in the home.

While the study helps to show what causes an eater to be picky, the findings suggest repeat exposure and parental modeling can go a long way in changing a child’s food choices, innate or not. This is certainly the case for the Cohens. The parents serve salmon because they know it’s a healthy protein option, even though they’re not fans of it themselves. Had both decided not to eat salmon, they may have never discovered how much Lola loves it. By setting a good example with food, the Cohens may have started a healthy lifelong eating pattern for their daughter.



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Look in the mirror

If you feel you're raising a picky eater, it might be time to examine your own eating habits. Each day, Sarah Moran, RDN, sees the nature-versus-nurture debate firsthand in her business, [Sarah Moran Nutrition, LLC](#).

"Children learn how to eat from their family," she says. "If the parent refuses to eat his or her vegetables, the child is likely to do the same."

Moran recommends that parents serve a few healthy options at each meal, and at least one food your child is familiar with.

"Allow the child to choose what and how much to eat," she says.

"As long as you are confident that all options will be nourishing to them and you are providing a meal environment that is free of distractions, it doesn't matter if they eat a lot of one item and only a little or none of another."

The long-term goal, Moran says, is for families — parents and children — to enjoy healthy foods, not simply choke them down. "Keep finding new ways to prepare different vegetables, and don't give up," she says. "If you stick with it, your preferences will begin to change as your body and taste buds get used to healthier fare."

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If your child is still in the baby stage, be adventurous early and often. “Starting at about six months, introduce a new food every 48 to 72 hours,” says child-feeding expert [Kristen Yarker](#), M.Sc., R.D. “Babies at this age are in a developmental stage where they want to try new foods. Your goal is to introduce your baby to as many foods as possible before they hit the stage where they become wary of new foods.”

According to Yarker, a child can be exposed to a food lots of times before they actually enjoy it.



“You never know when the magical day will come when she tries it (and maybe even likes it),” she says.

Despite her daughter’s pickiness, Yates-Cohen is staying on the nurture path, making what Lola does eat healthier with the inclusion of extra nutrition. By adding whole-wheat flour and sweet potatoes to her pancakes and waffles; kale, spinach and wheat germ to her fruit smoothies; and zucchini, carrots and sweet potato to reduce sugar in muffins, Lola’s mom is giving her foods she loves. And mom and dad can rest assured that their daughter is getting proper nutrition, no matter how finicky she may be about the menu.

Build a broad palate

Diana Sugiuchi, RDN, L.N., founder of [Nourish Family Nutrition](#), recommends the following tips to help avoid picky eating:

- Don’t make special foods for your child. Let them eat what you eat, even from very young ages.
- Eat with your child. Be a good role model, as she learns by watching you.
- Never cajole or bribe a child to “just try a bite.” Research has shown that this typically backfires, making children actually less

likely to eat the foods you want them to try.

- Allow children to decide which foods from a meal they are going to eat, even if it is not what you would choose for them. Over time, they are more likely to eat a wider variety.
- Avoid ordering from the children's menu in restaurants. Instead, share your entrée with your child or ask for a smaller portion of a regular entrée.
- Children's tastes tend to change at around age 10. They may enjoy foods when they are older that they didn't eat when they were younger, and vice versa. But if you don't keep offering those foods, they will never have the chance to know their preferences.

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