What to say when your three-year-old won't eat dinner

"My three-year-old pushes his plate away and says "Yucky!" before he's even tried it. Do I make him take a bite? What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Just three more bites, and then you can have pudding."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You don't have to eat it. It's here if you want it. Dinner's finished when we all get up."

A three-year-old who refuses dinner sets off a parent's deepest worry: is he eating enough? The instinct is to bargain bite by bite. The research on young children and food pressure suggests the bargaining is part of the problem.

What is known, and at what age

In an experiment with preschoolers, children were sometimes asked to finish their food and sometimes not. They ate more when they were not pressured, and made far fewer negative comments about the food. It is one study, in a lab, with soup, but it fits what pediatricians say.

Picky eating is common and often passes. In a Dutch study of 4,018 children, about a quarter were picky eaters at eighteen months and at three; by six, about one in eight was. Almost two-thirds of the early picky eaters were no longer picky three years later.

The NHS says it is perfectly normal for toddlers to refuse food, not to force them, and to take the food away without saying anything. The American Academy of Pediatrics puts it as a split: the parent's job is to provide the food, the child's is to decide whether to eat it. It also warns against bribing with treats.

What the words do

Take 1 is a deal, and it makes vegetables the price of pudding. Take 2 takes the pressure off ("you don't have to"), keeps the food in front of him ("it's here"), and says when dinner ends, so there is a calm limit. Then talk about anything but the food. If he eats, don't make a fuss; if he doesn't, clear the plate without a word. Offer the same food again another day: it can take many tries.

If you live in two homes

Food can differ a lot between two homes, and a child may eat happily at one table and refuse at the other. That is not a verdict on your cooking or on you. Keep the same calm words at your table, and if you share anything with the other parent, share one line directly, adult to adult: no pressure to finish, and one meal for everyone.

In the UK

The NHS fussy eaters page says much the same for young children: do not force them to eat, take the food away without saying anything, and keep offering a variety of foods. If you are worried about your child's eating or growth, your health visitor (for under-fives) or GP is the place to start. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.