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

"My six-year-old sits at the table, says she hates everything on her plate, and it's the same fight every night. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're not leaving this table until that plate is clean."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You don't have to like it. There's a bit on your plate; eat it or leave it. The bread's there too."

A nightly fight about a plate is exhausting for everyone at the table. The instinct is to hold out until the plate is clean. What the research describes is slower and quieter: many small tastes, with no deal attached.

What is known, and at what age

In a randomised study at three London primary schools, children were offered a taste of sweet red pepper, a vegetable unfamiliar to them, eight times over two weeks. Children who were simply offered tastes came to like the pepper more and eat more of it than children who were given nothing. Children who got a sticker for eating it came out in between, not clearly better than either group. It was a small study, of 49 children, with one vegetable.

Picky eating often fades. In a Dutch study of 4,018 children, about a quarter were picky at three; by six, about one in eight still was.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says that pressuring children to eat, or punishing them if they don't, can make them actively dislike foods they might otherwise like. It suggests one meal for the whole family, no bribes, and offering refused foods again.

What the words do

Take 1 makes the plate a contest she can win only by giving in. Take 2 agrees she doesn't have to like it, leaves a small amount where she can see it, and points at a food she does eat. That is one more taste on offer, without a fight. Then talk about her day. If she tries it, don't make a fuss; if she leaves it, clear it without comment, and serve it again next week.

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 gives the same basics for younger children: do not force, take food away without comment, keep offering. If you are worried about your child's eating or growth, talk to your GP. 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.