

The Other Reason So Many Kids Are Picky Eaters

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"It is really weird," Colin's mother reported. "He will like and eat something for weeks and then suddenly say that it tastes bad or it is making him sick. He has to be making that up, right?"

Massey's mom had a different experience with her 9-year-old restrictive eater. "She ate asparagus or anything until age 2, then suddenly stopped. Now, if I insist she try anything new, she completely melts down. She is so reasonable about everything else," she sighed.

Colin and Massey are two members of the epidemic wave of fussy, unhealthy eaters in this generation of children. It is not news that too many children have horrific diets. They guzzle [sugar-laced drinks](#), [packaged snack foods](#) have become a major food group and [fruits and vegetables are sorely lacking](#) in their diets. What is less clear is who to blame for such a sad state of intake.

Experts, like former FDA commissioner David Kessler, place the blame firmly in the hands of processed food manufactures. Excessive amounts of sugar and salt are being added to smashed, crashed and rehashed food, resulting in a highly-addictive product designed to seduce and overwhelm the taste buds, he contends. Further, [aggressive advertising aimed at children](#) has been proven to be highly effective. As a result, people (especially children) overeat or only want the chemical-added, flavored-enhanced products.

Given the way taste and eating acclimation works, modern food alteration is undoubtedly a factor, but I believe there is a second, less recognized factor fueling the new wave of fussy eaters: anxiety.

A 2010 [study](#) by San Diego State University professor Jean Twenge found anxiety among children has risen five to eight times over the last several decades. Comparing the results of the same personality tests given to children fifty years ago to children today, researchers found modern children lack a sense of control over their own lives. They worry more but have fewer tools for coping. The scientists suggested the problem was a lack of play.

Traditionally, kid play involved making up games or acting out scenarios. During my childhood, I can remember playacting cops and robbers with my siblings. We would dress up and argue over different scenarios. Or we would make houses for our trolls with old boxes and scraps of fabric.

Now, a lot of kid "play" is actually entertainment. It is not open-ended problem solving, but controlled programming. Instead of building a playhouse, a child might "click together" a playhouse using a virtual house website. Or rather than pretending to be a police officer with pretend props, youngsters prefer a ready-made, more realistic cops and robbers video game.

When you think about it, there is not much today's child gets to control except food. They have to go to school, daycare and afterschool activities. Then there is homework and TV/computer time. With near-constant adult supervision and tight schedules, they are told where to sit, what to learn and when to go to bed but starting at age 2, they discover they can close their mouths.

In addition, when people are anxious, they choose to eat fast-burning starches and sugar. Anxiety raises stress hormones and eating starch and/or sugar temporarily reduces stress hormones. This is why most people agree cookies, chips and pasta are comfort foods while asparagus and chickpeas are not. When children (and adults) are chronically anxious, they will instinctually forage for starchy foods to calm themselves down and if given the choice, will eat little else.

Put together the wide availability of processed comfort foods, the high level of anxiety among children and given the way children's brains work, it is no surprise that parents report if they don't give their child what they want, she will not eat at all. What is a parent to do with a 4-year-old willing to starve herself rather than eat what is served for dinner?

I think we have to recognize kids need control over some aspects of their lives, but that should not include total control of their diets. They need open-ended play to help reduce anxiety but not open-ended food choices. If anything is available for dinner, than the kid brain will always choose the salty or sweet processed foods that melt in their mouth and consistently tastes the same. Knowing what to expect reduces anxiety. This is why self-restrictive eaters will only eat brand X chicken nuggets but not your healthier homemade ones and why a green bean will rarely be as appealing as a French fry.

Absolutely avoid processed foods to help your picky eater but also look for tools to help them deal with anxiety.