

for parents and family of teens

From Skye Van Zetten, advocate and founder of Mealtime Hostage blog and parent-peer online support group.

Dear Parent,

Being the parent of a young teen who has struggled with food for most of their life is an isolating experience. I can think of few things that are more painful than feeling unable to nourish your child with food. Over the years, I've learned that it hurts just as much to be that child who cannot please his parents with his eating. This dynamic is responsible for endless mealtime battles where nobody emerges victorious.

While that immediate connection around the kitchen table is often spoiled with eating challenges, I've also come to understand that food is symbolic of connection, demonstrated worldwide through parents who are eager to pass along fond memories of sharing food in celebration with their children. When children resist meals that have been part of family traditions, sometimes for several generations, there is often a sense that the connection between one's ancestors and the youngest generation has been somehow severed. There is almost always a sense of loss.

While there are few statistics on picky eating, researchers estimate that about one in four children are picky eaters, and about half of this group will struggle with food acceptance in some way beyond childhood. In the United States alone, approximately 1 to 3 million 12-18 year olds are adversely affected by the sensory characteristics of food. At extremes, the number of foods some teens and adults are able to eat amount to two dozen items or less.

My worry and my stress about my son's eating did nothing to make him more willing to expand his food preferences. It did, however, motivate me to read and learn as much as I could about something even the Internet had never heard of. My search for information led me to the authors of this book, and their kind and gentle wisdom has been influential in my ability to nurture a more functional relationship around food with my son, and an environment that supports his eating ability. I decided to pay my gratitude forward through an online support group for parents ([facebook.com/groups/MealtimeHostage](https://www.facebook.com/groups/MealtimeHostage)). To date, over seven thousand families around the world have discovered how to nurture strong family connections through positive mealtime experiences, and a healthier relationship with food using many of the same techniques included in this book.

Your teen's diet is limited to a short list of foods because of strong preferences and dislikes for taste, texture, and temperature. The thought of trying unfamiliar food is as foreign to them as eating the bark of a tree is to you. Where we can come together on common ground is with understanding that everyone has food they don't like, and everyone is entitled to the privilege of discovering for themselves which foods are enjoyable to eat and which foods are not. Your job as a parent is not to convince your teen to like the same food as you do, but to grant your teen permission to develop their own relationship with food on their own terms and in their own time. This doesn't mean you will throw your arms up in defeat; quite the contrary, because your teen still depends on you to provide them with opportunities for eating. You are the metaphorical vehicle that will guide your teen on their journey into new food experiences; you just have to let them drive.

How does a parent change their relationship around food with their teen? You might start by reading this book together and understanding that your teen will do the best with eating they are capable of. Some teens might prefer working through this book on their own, coming to you when they are ready. While your history with food may look different than your teen's future, it helps to accept that your teen wants the same thing for himself that you want for him... a healthy relationship with food.

It also helps to understand that your teen's journey will be an emotional ride for you. After all, this is your child and their future is full of your hopes for their success and well-being. It will be difficult, but necessary, to put your emotions aside while your teen practices the skills they need to be successful with food and with eating in social situations.

The journey your teen is about to take with food is their own. This book will provide valuable tools to help them navigate along the way to a place with eating you have hoped they would eventually reach. Trust your teen to find his or her own way.

Skye Van Zetten