



Self-Care Eating Meals

Fussy Eaters Information Sheet

Many children and young people go through phases of refusing meals or being more picky with food. This can be a normal part of growing up but it can be worrying for families. Children and young people will have good and bad days but often still get enough nutrition to grow and to keep them healthy. Other children and young people are often described as 'fussy eaters' and 'picky eaters'. These terms are not always helpful. They tend to ignore the very real challenges that some people can face when it comes to mealtimes. Eating and feeding problems can sometimes dominate family life. It is easy to be overwhelmed when eating problems are severe and are so closely tied to your child's health and development. The fact that mealtime occurs at least three times a day, and families and children are not always able to eat at home, adds to the stress.



It is important to rule out any medical reasons for them not eating or having a restricted diet first.

- Do they have a sore throat or tooth abscess?
- Do they have chewing or swallowing difficulties?
- Are they worried about their weight or shape?

If you or your child/young person are worried about any of the above discuss this with their G.P.

Eating is a Sensory Experience

We use all our senses when eating and they all work together.



Vision (visual)

Eating starts with our eyes. We need to be able to see where the food is. We also look at the shape, colour and presentation of our food.



Touch (tactile)

We touch the food with our hands, body and face so that we can move the food from the plate and into our mouths. We have to be able to feel the food as we put it into our mouths and chew it. Our sense of touch also tells us the shape and texture of the food and whether it is hot or cold.



Smell (olfactory)

As we smell food as we bring it towards our mouths.



Taste (gustatory)

As the food goes into our mouths we taste it.



Hearing (auditory)

We listen to how the food sounds as we eat it, particularly if we eat something hard.



Body Awareness
(proprioception)

We use this sense to work out how much force to use when biting and chewing different foods. It also tells us when our mouths are full/empty.

Vestibular (Balance)

We use this sense to help us keep our head upright and in the correct position when eating.

Interoception
(how the body is feeling)

Some people find it difficult to read their body signals so they may not know when they are hungry or when they have had enough food.

Investigation

If your child/young person has a restricted diet then the first step is to carry out some detective work. Try to work out what, when, where and how your child/young person will and won't eat certain foods. Using a food diary might help you to do this.

If you are worried about your child's dietary intake, it may be useful to keep a food diary. Use this to keep track of how much they eat and what they eat. It is useful to note:

- what they ate and the amount they ate
- what time of day they ate
- where they ate and who was there

It may also be useful to note other factors like:

- distractions (was the TV on?)
- did they eat off their favourite plate,
- were they in a busy/noisy school dining hall.



Although some children have a restricted diet, it can still be 'good enough'. If they are eating from all the main food groups then their diet could be 'good enough'.

There are lots of reasons why your child/young person might not eat particular foods.

- Think about whether your child has had a traumatic experience with food. Did they choke on food or were they sick after eating something? This can affect how they feel about eating and how they take part in meal times.
- You might want to think about whether they are worried about their weight or body shape. This could be affecting what they are eating too.
- Some people dislike changes in their routine. This can affect their eating pattern. Foods given in a different way, at a different time or in a different place might be refused. Some people will notice a difference in food packaging, and this may result in them refusing to eat a food they previously ate.
- Could it be a sensory processing difference? Are there patterns to the foods your child/young person likes/dislikes? Be aware of textures, heat, cold, smell and colour.

Once you know what, when, where, how and why your child/young person will/won't eat you can develop a plan to increase the number and variety of foods your child/young person will eat. It is important to be calm and not controlling. Struggles and battles over eating can



often make matters worse. Often the most successful experiences are when children/young people are given some control over eating.

Sensory Differences

We all process sensory information differently. What smells good to one person can be unpleasant to others. What feels comfortably warm to some may be too hot for others. Try to avoid saying 'eat it, it tastes good' or 'don't be silly it's not too hot'. Your child/young person may process the sensory information differently to you. It might be too hot for them.

As all the senses work together you can have differences in processing one or more senses.

If you are over (hyper) sensitive to touch, the 'feel' of the food can be an issue. The temperature or texture of foods can be painful or unpleasant or needs to be 'just right'. Some people insist on all foods being at room temperature. This may mean that cold foods such as ice cream are not tolerated. Cooked foods will need to be cooled to room temperature before being eaten. Some people prefer soft pureed food, whilst others prefer hard crunchy food. The feel of food changes as we chew i.e. apple goes from firm to 'mushy' and leaks juice when chewing. These changes can be confusing and off putting for some people.

Smell and taste work together. As everyone processes smell and taste differently we all have our own likes and dislikes. Some people might prefer bland food or hot spicy food. Some people have a very strong sense of smell. The smell of a food they don't like can be enough to make them lose their appetite, gag or feel sick. Some people are so sensitive to certain smells that they cannot sit in the same room with someone who is eating a food they dislike. Eating in the kitchen or near where food is being prepared can be overwhelming. Try to make sure that your child/young person is exposed to smells one at a time. This will allow them to get used to the smell of different foods. You might need to open the window to get rid of strong food smells before your child comes in for their meal. Or you could allow them to eat in another room away from the smells.

Top Tips

- Eat together and be a role model. This is a really important way for children/young people to learn about food and eating.
- Routine and structure. Have regular meal and snack times.
- Get messy. Give lots of time for taking part in messy play activities and food preparation.
- Involve them. Involve children/young people in meal planning, shopping, preparing meals, serving the meal and cleaning up.
- Give some choice over what to eat.
- No pressure. Some children need lots of chances to get used to a new food before they try it. Give your child lots of chances to see different foods with no pressure to eat them.
- Introduce new foods slowly and try to change one thing at a time.
- Have fun at mealtimes.



Eat Together and be a Role Model

It is important that children and young person see others enjoying eating and trying different foods. Eating together is a great way for children and young people to learn about food.

If you can put the food on the table. You can then serve up to make sure everyone gets a little bit of everything. If you don't have a table can you all sit together.



Talk about what foods taste, smell, feel, look and sound like. Use words like 'crunchy', 'chewy', 'sour' or 'sweet' when talking about food. This will help your child a better idea of what the food might taste or feel like in their mouth.

Top Tips from Parents

"I have found it helpful discussing what I like and dislike, so kiddo knows we all have our own preferences and issues. I'll admit that I hate broccoli, for example, but also tell him I keep trying and found one way I like it prepared."

"We will all do a new food challenge - parents included."

"When we talk about the need to eat better, I tell him I should eat better too, that we could all benefit from it, etc."

Routine and Structure

Have regular meal and snack times. Aim for 3 meals and 2 or 3 nutritious snacks a day. You want to discourage 'grazing' and encourage routine. Try to leave at least 90minutes between meals and snacks. Try not to leave more than 4 hours between meals. Try not to rush meals as children and young people may be slow to eat but avoid letting meals last longer than 20-30 minutes. Timers can be useful at mealtimes to show how long meal time will last.

Some children and young people find it difficult to sit to eat a whole meal. Try short times sitting and build on this so that your child is successful. Don't expect big changes after 10 minutes, an hour, or even a week. Patience and consistency with this process is key to success. Remember it isn't always easy, especially when you've had a long tiring day!

Get Messy

Give lots of time for taking part in messy play activities. You can find lots of messy play ideas here: Messy Play Activities 1 and Messy Play Activities 2 (www.nhs.uk/childrens-services/ot-activity-information-sheets/messy-play-activities), Play Scotland Messy and Creative Play (www.playscotland.org/parents-families/messy-play-2). It is also important to let your child play with their food. Make sure you explain any behaviours that are not acceptable, such as throwing the whole plate of food on the floor. Let them touch and feel the texture of the food. This helps your child explore the food with their touch sense before they use their sense of taste.





Involve Them

Encourage your child to help you with meal preparation. Children are more likely to taste something if they help make it. They could go to the shops with you, then select and buy ingredients, if they are comfortable with this. There should be no pressure to eat what they have prepared.



If they do not like to go shopping, you can plan a meal at home; look up a recipe and shop on-line.

If you have a garden, let your child help you grow fruit, vegetables, and herbs.

If age appropriate, let them help with cooking, mixing, chopping. Let your child put the food in the pan and help you to arrange food on each plate so it looks nice. If they have a chance to help prepare food they are more likely to touch and smell it.

Give Choice

Give children a sense of control. Let your child/young person choose between chicken or fish, beans or peas, potato or rice when planning meals. Try to stick to two choices, any more and your child can become overwhelmed. When choosing foods, encourage your child to make up a weekly menu, and use pictures to illustrate what each meal will be. Visual timetables can be useful.



If you can put the food out and eat 'family style', where you or your child/young person serves up so everyone has a little bit of everything. Make sure you have food you know your child or young person will eat as well as other food they might not have tried before. If you can, get them to put a little bit of the new food on their plate (they don't have to eat it if they don't want to). You could try asking them to serve you the food. If this is too much, leave it and move on.

Children do not want to be tricked. Tricks such as hiding 'extra' vegetables in spaghetti sauce and or supplements in a child's favourite drink do sometimes work but can also backfire. Sometimes, after finding 'additions' to familiar favourites, children learn to be suspicious of all foods and will limit their diet even further. This strategy probably works best when the sensory characteristic the child is focusing on is the 'look' of the food. If a child is more sensitive to the smell, taste or texture of a food, it may be harder to make 'additions' because they are usually easier for the child to detect. Be cautious when using this strategy. Do let your child try sauces with their food, if this helps them to accept and tolerate new foods.



No Pressure

The aim is for mealtimes to be as stress free as possible. The focus should be on patience and to let your child feel in control of what will and won't be eaten. Pressure and arguments usually only make children more resistant to new foods than ever and it's a battle you are unlikely to win.



Make sure meal times are fun and not confrontational, if your child struggles with the social 'chit chat' of mealtimes, try putting on some music or an audio book.

Remember, try and keep the pressure off. The goal isn't eating when you are exploring new foods, just play, and if your child happens to eat something new – bonus!

Introduce New Foods Slowly

It is important to introduce new foods gradually. Try introducing one new food at a time alongside a food you know they will eat. This will help your child/young person to get used to the smell, look and feel of the food.

When texture is a known issue, try to introduce new foods in a similar way at first. For example, a new vegetable can be turned into a puree if chunky textures aren't liked, or traditionally hot food can be served at room temperature.

Start with a food that has a good 'sensory fit'. Chose a food that has similar to the foods they like. If your child will eat chicken nuggets, try them with baked chicken strips. If they will only eat a certain brand of pizza, try a different brand.

Offer the food on a daily basis. Think of how your child might best accept a new food in their space. Using a small separate bowl or plate placed near to them might work. You then need to try to increase your child's exposure to the new food by gradually moving through the steps below:

1. Put the new food on the table
2. Put the new food on their plate
3. Encourage them touch it
4. Encourage them to lick the food
5. Encourage them to put the food in their mouth
6. Encourage them to chew the food
7. Encourage them to swallow the food



Have fun

Be creative. Your child may be more willing to eat “rocks and trees” than meatballs and broccoli. Fun arrangements such as some vegetable sticks and grapes / tomatoes placed in a smiley face pattern on a plate may encourage your child to taste something new. Let them play with their food as much as possible. Make food fun!



Top Tips from Parents

“.....another great strategy his dad came up with was R&O Cafe (named after dad and child), where they set up a restaurant for O's 'pets' (stuffed animals who seem to have birthdays - and thus birthday parties - every day). They write up a menu, O takes orders (great writing practice, as he HATES writing), and then dad prepares the food (usually carrots, tomatoes, bread, etc) and drinks (usually water or milk) and O delivers it.... and often nibbles it to pretend the animals have eaten it. Genius.”

These strategies aren't just for new foods. Sometimes 'picky eaters' will often stop eating something they previously loved, never to touch it again. Hopefully you will find some that work for you and your child. Remember some new foods need to be tried around 20 times before they will be accepted.

