

## Fussy Eating

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Fussy eating is very common with up to one half of toddlers reported to be fussy eaters. It is a normal part of development which most children grow out of and eventually learn to eat a broader range of foods. However, having a child who is a fussy eater can make mealtimes miserable and cause a lot of worry so this factsheet will explore how to support your child if they are a fussy eater.

### Signs of Fussy Eating

There is no accepted definition of what 'fussy eating' is but it is generally agreed that it is a feeding difficulty where children:

- Have strong preferences for a small number of foods
- Have a limited variety of foods they will eat
- Are unwilling to try new foods
- Are unwilling to eat familiar foods

### What causes fussy eating?

Fussy eating is thought to be caused by a developmental response known as food neophobia. In the past, it protected children from eating food that was potentially harmful to them. In today's world, where food is much safer to eat, this response becomes unhelpful.



### Tips to support fussy eaters

Good eating habits start young so it is important to keep offering a wide variety of foods. There are many ways that you can support your child, so give some of these tips a try:

- *Allow lots of time for meals* - if you are trying a new food, make sure that you have lots of time. This will help you and your child to feel relaxed.
- *Keep calm if your child turns food away* - try not to react if your child refuses food. Gently encourage them to eat what is left. If they still refuse, take the food away without saying anything.
- *Give lots of praise* - children like to be encouraged whilst they are eating. A well done can make your child feel good and they might just keep going.
- *Keep to a routine* - always feed your child at the same times every day and stick to a routine of breakfast, lunch and tea with a healthy snack at mid-morning and mid-afternoon.
- *Eat the same food as your child* - it really helps if you can set an example. If you are eating the same foods as your child, then they will copy what you do.
- *Be creative with food* - try to make food look appealing by using lots of colourful food and thinking about how it is presented. You could make food into shapes or theme it to whatever your child likes, maybe dinosaurs or princesses.
- *Get your child cooking* - children love getting involved in the kitchen. Learning basic cooking skills really increases their confidence with food.



- *Give small portions* – this is important if you know that your child is new to the food or they have refused it before. Seconds can always be given if they eat it all first.
- *Avoid drinks and snacks near mealtimes* - having a lot to drink or eating snacks near to mealtimes can fill your child up. Your child might be refusing their food as they are simply not hungry.
- *Build on foods your child likes* - if your child will eat potatoes, offer them lots of different varieties such as mashed, boiled or roast potatoes as this can increase the range of foods that they will accept.
- *Let your child feed themselves* - children learn about new foods by exploring them with their senses. Touching, smelling, tasting and seeing are all important parts of learning about new foods.

- *Be consistent* - it is important to make sure that everyone that looks after your child, such as grandparents or your childminder, are all doing the same thing at mealtimes. Keep talking to them about your child's likes and dislikes.
- *Keep offering new foods* - remember that children can need to be offered a food 10-15 times before they will accept it. Offer a new food alongside a familiar favourite to encourage your child to accept it.

### Is my child getting enough food or nutrients?

It is natural to worry that your child might not be getting enough food or nutrients. If your child is growing, gaining weight, is active and they seem well, then they are getting enough to eat. Think about what your child eats over a week, rather than on a daily basis and try to include foods from the 4 main food groups:

- Fruit and vegetables
- Potatoes, bread, pasta, rice and other starchy carbohydrates
- Dairy or dairy alternatives
- Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins

If the fussy eating continues and you are worried, ask your health visitor or GP for advice. They can refer you on for specialist help, if needed.

### References

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