

Encouraging Variety in Children's Diets

Establishing healthy eating patterns early on in life can improve dietary choices and health outcomes in later life. Lots of factors can affect a child's food intake including family eating habits, influences from peers and the availability of different food types. Fussy eating is a common problem in young children. Children develop a preference for certain foods and become unwilling to try new foods, often the preference is for plain, familiar foods and foods with a high fat or sugar content. It can lead to a restricted, unhealthy diet that is high in calories and low in nutrients. Once your child has established fussy eating patterns it can be hard and frustrating trying to change these but with patience, consistency and a calm approach you can change this!



Tips for Encouraging Variety and Healthy Eating in Fussy Children

Children's tastes can be influenced over time through repeated exposure to new foods and reduced exposure to less healthy foods. Easy access to sweet foods and drinks will interfere with your child's willingness to eat new foods, reduce the amount of sugary foods and drinks in the house and slowly replace these with healthier alternatives. Take it slowly, be patient and know that changing children's dietary preferences and patterns takes time but it is much harder once they reach adulthood!

Continuous Exposure to a Variety of Foods

It is important to offer your child a variety of foods with no pressure to eat them. Put small amounts of a new food on their plate so they are not overwhelmed and overtime the food will feel less foreign to them. It can take up to 15 times before they will actually try it but keep offering and making it the norm for food like veg to go on their plate. Over time increase the amount of the food offered.



Offer the Same Food to the Whole Family

This can be difficult, but try to make the same meal for everyone unless there are specific dietary requirements. Start by serving small portions of the meal component they are fussy with (e.g. veg or sauce) and gradually serve more over time.

Involve Them in the Cooking Process

Getting kids involved with cooking is important. If a food feels unknown to them, they might be cautious of it. The more they handle foods the more likely they will eat it. Try taking them to the supermarket to show them the variety of fruit and veg, then take some home to prepare and cook.



Remain Calm

Make meal times enjoyable. Forcing children to eat food can actually have the opposite effect and make them less likely to eat it. Instead try to explain why certain foods like vegetables are important to eat. If a child still rejects the food, calmly take the food away and don't say anything. Save the leftovers for later if they get hungry and offer these instead of a different meal or snack.

Try Different Variations of a Food



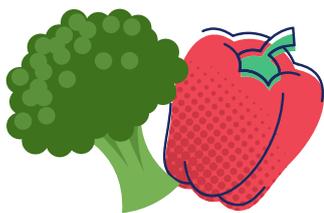
Making some foods more appealing can help encourage children to eat more of it (especially vegetables). Try grating raw veg like carrot instead of steaming or boiling it. Roasting veg with herbs and spices can be very tasty - just avoid adding salt. Other options include adding foods like veg and beans/lentils into meals. Chop them up small and add to curry, chilli, soup and pasta sauces.

Be a Positive Role Model

Children look up to and copy adults who are close to them. To help encourage your child to eat better, try to eat meals with them. Studies have shown that children are more open to eating new foods if they see adults eating it. Having a positive attitude about food is also important. Speaking negatively about a particular food around a child can influence how likely they are to eat it.



Add New Foods to Favourite Foods



To increase the likelihood of a child accepting a new vegetable, try introducing a small amount of this alongside a type of veg they already like. Initially to help get your child to eat new vegetables, you can serve these with their favourite condiment. Eventually reduce the amount of this condiment served as they get used to the new flavours. For other foods, try 50/50 - mix their current preferred foods with healthier alternatives. This can work with cereals (high sugar with low sugar cereals) and pasta (wholemeal and white pasta).

Don't Rush Meals

Children can be slow eaters and it can take them a while to try a new food. Create a relaxed environment and avoid distractions such as television or toys. Use mealtimes as a chance for your child to learn about food and bond with family.

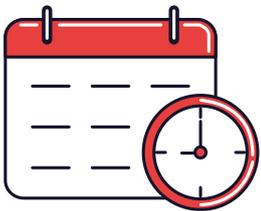


Understand Their Appetite

A child's appetite will vary depending on how much activity they have done and if they are going through a growth spurt. If your child isn't hungry, try not to force them to eat food. However, it is important to get the timing right, as waiting until a child is very hungry to feed them can result in their blood sugar dipping, which can cause them to feel a bit unwell and uninterested in food. Children are often hungry after school and this is the perfect opportunity to get some good nutrients into them. Have something healthy prepared so you don't cave with the pressure of a hangry child! Try a bowl of soup or pitta bread and houmous.



Eating Patterns are Just as Important as Food Choices



It is good to structure an eating routine around 3 main meals with 1-2 healthy snacks. Snacks should only be given to a child 2 hours before or after a meal so that they are hungry at their next meal. Avoid giving milk, smoothies or fizzy drinks too close to dinner as well, as these can make children feel full and more likely to refuse nutritious foods. It can be challenging, but try to only give a snack after dinner if a child has eaten their meal and avoid giving sugary snacks at this time. If children know they can get something sweet instead, they are more likely to be fussy at meal times.

Give Your Child a Choice

Giving children options will make them feel more in control. It's good to set some basic rules for meals, like there will always be vegetables served with dinner but involve your child in deciding which ones. Give them closed choice options e.g. "would you like peas or carrots?" rather than "would you like any vegetables?"



This or That?

Praise Progress with Non-Food Rewards



Make sure to give lots of praise for little efforts to eat new foods. Try starting a reward chart that praises a child when they eat their vegetables at dinner time or try a new food. It is important not to reward children with food, as they may end up associating certain positive emotions with particular foods and this can cause them to over-eat. Reward at the end of the week with a trip to the park or doing a fun activity together.