



Fussy Eaters—Strategies to Support Eating New Foods

If your child is a fussy eater, it can make mealtimes an emotional time – and it can leave you as a parent feeling anxious, worried or frustrated with your child's eating habits. However upsetting or frustrating it can sometimes feel, fussy eating can actually be considered a part of your child's development, as they are exploring their environment and asserting their independence. In addition, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and or learning difficulties are more likely to have mealtime challenges such as narrow food selections, ritualistic eating behaviour (for example, not allowing foods to touch), and meal-related tantrums. A good first step in helping your child eat a more varied diet is trying to understand *why* your child has fussy eating habits.



- Do they have a sensory sensitivity? Do they only tolerate one specific food texture?
- Is it related to their routine? Do they only want to eat at the same time every day?
- Do they experience difficulties with new experiences, such as trying unfamiliar foods?
- Are they preoccupied with a certain type of food?

Understanding why will allow you to choose appropriate strategies in helping your child overcome their mealtime difficulties. In addition, here are some general strategies that you can put in place to help all children during mealtimes.

1) Exposure

Use exposure in a gradual manner to introduce unfamiliar foods to your child. Over time, allowing your child to become familiar with the smell, look and texture of unfamiliar food without the pressure of eating it may help make mealtimes less stressful for you and your child. Here are some tips for a graduated step-by-step approach to introducing new foods to your child:



- **Step 1: Tolerating the physical presence or sight of the food.** For the first step, place the food on the opposite side of the table to your child, so that they get used to looking at it. There should be no pressure from you or anyone at the table to





eat or touch it. Gradually move the food closer to your child over time.

- **Step 2: Interacting with the food.** Once your child is used to the sight of the food, the next step is interacting with it, without directly touching it. For example, helping in preparation by mixing or stirring, using utensils to touch the food, or touching through a napkin.
- **Step 3: Smelling the food.**
- **Step 4: Touching the food to skin.** This step is not necessarily asking your child to eat the food, rather them getting used to the texture in their hands or against their mouth.
- **Step 5: Tasting the food.** At this stage, your child doesn't necessarily need to chew or swallow the food. This can simply be "kissing" or licking the food.
- **Step 6: Eating the food.** This is the last step, and involves your child chewing and swallowing the food.



If using exposure as a strategy, what is most important for you as a parent is having patience. Many children need to taste a food up to 12 times before they're willing to eat it without a fuss, and children with additional needs may take longer.



2) Social Learning

As a parent, you are the best role model for your child, as they watch and learn from you every day. If you model good feeding behaviours you are teaching your child how to act appropriately during mealtimes. Some mealtime tips:

- During mealtimes, try to have a **positive attitude**. This isn't always easy! Try to focus on showing patience, and allowing your child to feel in control of what will and won't be eaten. Undue pressure and arguments are only going to make you feel stressed, and make your child more resistant to new foods.
- Your **body language** during mealtimes also gives your child information. Try not to show disappointment or frustration if your child is reluctant to join in an eating activity. Think about your





non-verbal signs, such as your tone of voice, facial expressions, relaxed body, language and posture.

- Try to **involve your child with all aspects of the meal**; preparing the food in the kitchen, serving the food, or setting the table, and cleaning up after the meal is finished.
- If possible, try not to make a completely separate meal for your child. This may inadvertently teach your child that they'll get a special meal if they carry on being fussy.



3) Structuring meal and snack times

Having a predictable and structured routine reduces anxiety for children with ASD and/or learning difficulties – if your child is a fussy eater then having a structured and predictable routine may reduce mealtime anxieties. Some tips:

- Designate a certain place or area in your home where all meals and snacks will be eaten. Use the same cues every day to signal to your child that a mealtime is approaching, in order to get their body ready to eat.
- Try to follow approximately the same time schedule every day. Some children may also benefit from sitting in the same place at the table every day, or using the same plate or cutlery.
- Present information visually. You could use clear daily or weekly menus of foods and display the time of the next meal in a prominent position in your home, for example.
 - If appropriate, you could also use a food group chart to demonstrate that they should try to have at least one food from each group every day. Try not to categorise foods into healthy and unhealthy, or good and bad, as this can sometimes be taken too literally and cause further problems.
- Aside from time of day, you can also create a mealtime / snacking routine:





Beginning

- Preparing your child for finishing a task, to help signal that it is time for a new task (e.g. leading to your child sitting at the table for a snack). Using tools such as a timer or a countdown can be helpful to signal a change in activity.



Middle

- The focus is upon the food, eating and parents modelling appropriate behaviours. Try to keep meals to 3 foods at any one time, with at least one preferred food presented, and others foods included for exposure.



End

- Cleaning up, and leaving the table. For example, putting cutlery in the sink.

The time limit for each snack should be about 15 minutes, and for meals, about 30 minutes.

4) Using Rewards

Using rewards and praise is a useful tool in encourage your child to eat a varied diet. See our previous resource for challenging behaviour which explains the use of rewards in more detail. Some specific mealtime guidelines:

- Use specific verbal praise for any positive mealtime behaviour. Focus on what your child is doing well, instead of correcting what they're doing wrong. In general, avoid using "no", "stop" or "don't" as the first word in a sentence.
- If using a reward other than verbal praise (for example, giving your child extra time doing their preferred activity), ensure that the emphasis of the reward is not just on eating a certain amount of non-preferred food, but tolerating new food being around, or tasting a new food. Rewards work best if presented immediately after the appropriate behaviour, so ensure you can provide the reward immediately after the mealtime
- Try to avoid using preferred food as a reward for trying a new or non-preferred food. This could make the preferred food more attractive and the new food a chore.

