



Coping with Fussy Eaters: Tips, Tricks and Ideas

(Composed by Speech and Language Therapy Department)



General Mealtime Advice

1. Mealtime Rules and Routines:

Creating a predictable mealtime structure will make it easier for the child to learn what is expected of them. The routine will also get the child primed and ready to eat.

- Eat in the same room, at the same table, with same utensils and try to have meals/snacks at regular times.
- Have a clear signal/sign that a meal or snack is ready such as washing hands or setting the table if age appropriate.
- Children have small tummies so below is the 'rule of thumb' for the amount they should eat. The 'rule of thumb' is a tablespoon for each year of age.
 - 1 tablespoon of each food group for each year of your child's age, for example a 3 year old having a 3 food group dinner should be given 9 tablespoons of food on a plate.
- Limit choices to 2 or 3 options per meal.
- Meals should take no longer than 20-30 minutes and snacks should normally last 10-15 minutes. If your child has difficulty sitting for this time – start with a shorter time and slowly increase the times the child has to sit. Clear food away after 30 minutes (unless child has oro-motor difficulties and eats slowly).
- Schedule 3 meals and 2-3 snacks for your child each day. Meals and snacks should happen at the same time every day. A meal or snack should happen every 2-4 hours.
- Consider 5-6 small meals daily if your child does not eat 3 large meals.



2. Lead by Example:

Mealtimes will give your child lots of opportunities to learn about food. We need to be good role models. They are watching and learning from you every day. When you are eating, children are listening to what you are saying and how you are reacting to the food.

- Talk about how your food tastes, e.g. "That's really hot and spicy" or "Yum, I like the crunchy bits" and show your enjoyment with your facial expressions.
- Help your child learn about what to do with food – over emphasise chewing with mouths open and using exaggerated swallowing.
- Do not make faces or bad comments about food.



3. Keep Mealtimes Positive and Relaxed:

Mealtimes should be positive and relaxed. During the meal, make sure that **ANY** interaction with the food is rewarded. Verbal praise is the best however; a smile, a touch, a cheer, clapping are all other options. Try to focus on what they are doing well rather than what they are not doing well. Do not provide attention for your child not eating.

Examples of behaviour you should praise:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Coming to the table | Sitting well in their chair |
| Watching other people eating | Staying at the table during mealtime |
| Allowing food to be on the plate | Touching food |
| Smelling food | Tasting food |



To create a relaxed atmosphere, you can talk about other things apart from food and eating during mealtimes. Include the rest of the family and talk about what happened today; encourage everyone to take a turn in the conversation.

Encourage your child to try new foods

The more times children are exposed to a new food, the more they tend to like it. Children need to taste and swallow a food at **least 10 times** before deciding if it is something they like. Giving up completely, after one rejected bite or two times of trying the food, might eliminate a food from your child's diet that could be a potential favourite after a few more tries. Here are some tips to encourage your child to try a new food:

- Offer new foods only when your child is hungry and rested.
- Only present one new food at a time.
- Offer new foods that are similar to those your child already eats. Find out which foods and flavours your child likes. Your child does not have to eat every variety of fruit or vegetables. Allow your child to eat the flavours they like – while still encouraging new foods and intermingling them.
- Pair and/or mix new food with your child's favourite to encourage acceptance:

- Put new food and favourite food on the same plate. Your child will probably eat their favourite food first. Encourage your child to try the new food before they leave the table.
- Start with a small piece of the new food and a larger piece of the favourite food. Encourage your child to try one bite. Start with a small bite of the new food and increase the number of bites your child needs to eat over time.
- Slowly increase the size of the new food and decrease the size of the favourite food. Increase the amount of new foods by half a teaspoon at a time.
- If your child resists you putting the new food on the same place as preferred food – put the new food and favourite foods on separate plates. Give your child the plate with their favourite food after they tried the new food.
- Only introduce new food when some improvement is shown during the mealtime offer.



- Make it fun – make a game, contest, etc. out of trying new foods.
- Try new foods yourself – children are great observer. Model eating new food and demonstrate that certain foods taste good. Having another child – such as a peer or sibling – show that he or she likes this food as well. Have picnics with other children or siblings outside in the garden– children imitate and learn from other children best, no matter what age.
- Develop new ways to present foods – cut into neat or fun shapes, use dips, etc.





Tips and Ideas for 'Very Fussy Eaters'

If you have implemented all the above tips and tricks and your child still refuses to try new foods, here are some further ideas. Remember all these things take time. It can be a long, slow process of change that will require consistency and firmness to resolve.

1. **Limit drinking:**

Children will often drink to avoid eating and over drinking is one of the biggest causes of picky eating. Offer juice or milk at set times of the day. Excessive drinking can cause your child to feel full. Try not to let your child walk around with a bottle or cup of juice all day long. You could try allowing your child to have water or a drink up to one hour before the next meal or snack.



2. **Involve your child in the food and cooking process:**

Allow your child to help with preparation. Young kids can pick their favourite plate and spoon. Older kids can help cut, prepare, and serve food. Increase/decrease flavour or temperature of foods according to your child's preference. Encourage your child to plant a vegetable garden with you and take your child grocery shopping with you if possible.



3. **Combine a "disliked" food with a "liked" food:**

You could try serving broccoli or other vegetables with ranch dressing or ketchup or cheese with vegetables. Spices, sauces and dips can make foods taste more appealing. Use them in moderation but recognise their potential to enhance taste. Consider alternative options. If your child won't eat vegetables, try vegetable crisps.

4. **Learning Plates:**

Try placing 'new foods' on a 'learning plate' beside the child's regular dinner plate. Do not put the new food on your child's plate if he/she is a very fussy eater. Encourage your child to talk about and explore the new food. Your child might not eat/try new foods right away so encourage your child to:

- Smell the food
- Touch the food
- Put food to lips
- Taste new food



Praise your child if they do any of the above. If your child does try or taste new foods, do not make a huge fuss, he or she simply did what you expected in the first place.

5. **Consider Food Chaining:**

In this process, the child is presented with new foods that may be similar in taste, temperature, or texture to foods the child already likes and accepts. Take it in very small steps. Here are some ideas on how to get started:

- Identify the foods that your child eats and accepts.
- Choose other foods with similar sensory properties – foods with similar taste, texture and colour. For example - Does your child show a preference for soft, crunchy or smooth foods? Preference for bland foods? Preference for white/ beige foods?
- Introduce very small changes. Be careful not to contaminate 'safe' foods.
- It is likely to take multiple tries. There is no expectation to eat the new food but give your child praise if it happens.



Examples of 'Food Chaining':

1. *Your child will only eat Mc Donald's Chips*

Mc Donald's chips → Mc Cain French Fries → Home Made Chips → Sweet Potato Chips → Roast Potatoes → Mashed potatoes

2. *Your child will only eat plain white bread*

Bread → Bread sticks → Crackers → Cracker and cheese → Peas and cheese → Broccoli and cheese → Broccoli

3. *Your child will only eat chocolate chip cookies for snack*

Chocolate chip cookies → Chocolate chip granola bar → Yoghurt with granola and chocolate chip cookies → Yoghurt with granola and blueberries → Blueberries

4. *Your child will only eat crisps for snack*

Potato crisps → Banana chips → Frozen banana slices → Banana slices



6. Have a 'Food Contract'

For older children, write down a contract that you and your child will agree to. Design a menu with acceptable foods - parent and child must agree on the choices. Each week add one new food to the menu and the child must choose it at least one time.

1. Choose a new, non-preferred food to taste that is close to the range that the child already eats easily, e.g. a new type of bread, biscuit or a new flavour of crisp.
2. Expect the child to eat a tiny piece or crumb of the new food at each meal and snack time before they are allowed to eat the preferred food or drink.
3. Offer the same food for 4 days before changing to a new one. Repeating the same food will reduce any anxiety by increasing familiarity.
4. Increase the amount of the new food; if following successive presentations, your child starts to eat it without distress. Try initially increasing it by half a teaspoon.
5. Develop a reward program associated with success, e.g. A Scrapbook where the child sticks in a picture or labels of food that they can eat and have tasted, or sticker charts for trying new foods. This increases the child's motivation to co-operate and creates a win/win situation.
6. If your child only eats white/beige bland foods - introduce new foods outside the carbohydrate range once the child has accepted the new pattern.



NB: If a concern about picky eating persists, consult with your GP. As long as your child's aversion to specific food is not hindering growth, health or development, allow dietary autonomy and refrain from excessive worry.