

Fussy Eating

Many children are fussy eaters. Fussy eating is normal, but it can be hard to handle. Most of the time fussy eating isn't about food – it's often about children wanting to be independent. Here are some ideas that might help if you have fussy eaters in the family.

About fussy eating and fussy eaters

It's normal for children to be fussy eaters – that is, to not like the shape, colour or texture of particular foods.

It's also normal for children to like something one day but dislike it the next, to refuse new foods, and to eat more or less from day to day.

This all happens because fussy eating is part of children's development. It's a way of exploring their environment and asserting their independence. And it's also because their appetites go up and down depending on how much they're growing and how active they are.

The good news is that **children are likely to get less fussy as they get older**. One day your child will probably eat and enjoy a whole range of different foods.

If your child is healthy and has enough energy to play, learn and explore, he's probably eating enough. But if you're worried about your child's eating habits, see your GP, your child and family health nurse or an accredited practising dietitian.

How to handle fussy eaters: make mealtimes pleasant

Your child's willingness to try food will depend partly on the eating environment. Pleasant, low-stress mealtimes can help.

Here are some tips:

- Make mealtimes a happy, social occasion. Try not to worry about spilled drinks or food on the floor. Instead [praise your child](#) for trying new food or eating healthy, familiar food.
- Have realistic expectations – for example, you can ask that your child tries all the food on the plate, or takes a certain number of mouthfuls.
- If your child is fussing about food, ignore it as much as you can. Giving fussy eating lots of attention can sometimes encourage children to keep behaving this way.
- Make healthy foods fun – for example, cut sandwiches into interesting shapes, or let your child help prepare a salad or whisk eggs for an omelette.
- Turn the TV off so the family can talk to each other instead.

Sometimes toddlers are too distracted to sit at the family table for a meal. If this sounds like your child, **try having quiet time before meals** so she can calm down before eating. Even the ritual of hand-washing can help.

You could also encourage your toddler to sit at the table with the family for most meals, but only for 15 minutes or so. You can build this time up as he gets older.

Offer a variety of nutritious foods from the five food groups at each family meal. Go for variety yourself – show your child that you’re willing to try new foods and that you enjoy them too. Healthy family food and an eating environment that encourages a positive attitude to healthy food make a great start for your child.

Giving fussy eaters independence with food

It can be a good idea to **support your child’s need for independence** when it comes to food.

If you give in to a few demands or preferences, you’ll help your child feel more in control. She’ll also be more likely to eat what she has a say in choosing. For example, it doesn’t hurt to take the crusts off bread if that’s what she wants.

You could also try letting your child make choices within a range of healthy foods. Just limit the options to two or three things, so your child doesn’t get too confused or overwhelmed to eat. For example, instead of asking your child to pick what he wants from the fridge, you could ask, ‘Would you like grapes or carrot sticks?’

Another top tip is getting your child involved in preparing family meals. She’ll feel proud of helping and be more likely to eat something she has helped to make.

How to introduce new foods to fussy eaters

If you have a fussy eater who doesn’t like trying new food, here are some tips that might help:

- Put a **small amount of new food** on the plate with familiar food your child already likes – for example, a piece of broccoli alongside some mashed potato.
- Make food attractive. Offer your child a variety of different colours, shapes and sizes and let your child choose what he eats from the plate.
- Keep offering a particular food. Your child will probably try it and eventually like it – but she might have to **see a food on the plate 10-15 times** before she even tries a taste.
- When possible, look for opportunities for your child to **share meals and snacks** with other children – he might be more willing to try a food if other children are tucking in.
- Serve your child the same meal the family is eating but in a portion size your child will eat. If your child doesn’t eat it, say something like, ‘Try it, it’s yummy’. If she still doesn’t want it, calmly say, ‘OK, we’ll try it another time when you’re hungry’.
- Encourage your child to touch, smell or take a lick of the new food, then praise him for having a go. Then encourage him to take a bite. Praise your child for trying it.
- Offer different foods from each of the [five good food groups](#). For example, if your child doesn’t like cheese, she might enjoy yoghurt instead.

Avoid unhealthy foods

It's tempting to offer your child food treats just so she 'eats something'. But if you offer fatty, sugary or salty snacks as substitutes, your child might start refusing healthier foods – after all, she'll know there are tastier options!

Offering unhealthy treats as bribes – for example, 'If you have a carrot, you can have some chocolate' – can also make your child more interested in treats than healthy foods.

Fussy eating facts

These facts can help you understand why children sometimes fuss about their food:

- Children's appetites are affected by their growth cycles. Even babies have fluctuating appetites. At 1-6 years, it's common for children to be really hungry one day and picky the next.
- Children have different taste preferences from grown-ups.
- Life is too exciting for children sometimes, and they're too busy exploring the world around them to spend time eating.
- Children learn by testing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. They can be very strong willed when it comes to making decisions about food (to eat or not to eat, and what to eat). It's all part of their social, intellectual and emotional development.

Sometimes your child will refuse food just because it gets an interesting reaction – from you! If children refuse to eat a food, it doesn't necessarily mean they dislike it (after all, they might not have even tasted it yet). They might just be putting on a show of independence to see what you'll do. Try to stay calm when this happens.

Reference:

http://m.raisingchildren.net.au/articles/fussy_eating.html