

Guidelines for fussy eating

Meal times are a common source of stress for parents. Often children learn they can gain some control over their parents by using food. When a child refuses food or demands alternative meals, parents may become frustrated or concerned that their child is not eating enough. These tips are designed to help manage meal times and to develop good eating behaviours.

Always remember that healthy children will not starve themselves.

What should I offer & how much?

- Try not to put too much on your child's plate; offer nutritious foods regularly (about 5-6 times a day). Your dietitian can provide more information about quantities of food for your child's age.
 - Offer your child the same food the rest of the family is eating. Avoid preparing separate meals.
 - Finger foods may be easier to manage and can offer more enjoyment and independence.
 - Avoid giving drinks or snacks one hour before meals. This will help ensure your child has a good appetite for their meal.
- Ensure food is the appropriate texture for your child. If your child is struggling with a particular texture, try other foods with similar nutrients. For example, yoghurt instead of milk; mince instead of chewy meat; raw or grated vegetables instead of cooked vegetables.
 - Provide your child with options at meal times to encourage their independence. Respect that they may have certain likes or dislikes. Limit to two options. For example, let them choose between two types of fruit or two sandwich fillings.
 - Limit milk and dairy foods to two serves each day (maximum of 500ml milk / day). Too much dairy can decrease appetite for other foods.
 - Avoid giving your child soft drink or cordial. Limit fruit juice to no more than ½ cup per day. These fluids can decrease your child's appetite for foods and they provide little nutrition.

Mealtime environment

- Eat together as a family. This is an important opportunity for your child to learn about food.
- Be a good role model. Eat healthy foods and show your child you enjoy them! Children are more likely to 'do as you do', rather than 'do as you say'.
- If you dislike a food, try not to make negative comments.
- Your child needs to associate meal times with positive feelings. Keep meal times relaxed and stay calm. Nagging and punishment add stress to the eating experience and this can affect your child's appetite.
- Allow the child some independence. You are responsible for providing the food (and when) and creating a positive environment; your child is responsible for how much, or even whether they eat.
- Provide your child with quiet activities just before meal times. Tiredness and over excitement can decrease appetite.
- Avoid distractions such as television, games and toys at meal times.

Set time frames

- Children need a meal time routine. They feel more secure when they know what to expect. Keep meal times regular and consistent.
- Set aside 20-30 minutes for meal times and 10–20 minutes for snacks. If the food is not eaten within this time period, allow your child to leave the table or quietly remove their plate.

Exploring food

- Make meals and snacks look appealing and fun. For example, offer a range of colours or foods arranged in the shape of a face. Include some of your child's favourite foods.
- Try different foods often. Children may need to be offered foods more than 10 times before accepting it. Do not assume that they do not like that food after only one or two attempts!
- Give children time to explore and familiarise themselves with new foods. Encourage involvement with foods (e.g. food preparation, cooking and shopping) and allow them to serve themselves from a range of healthy options.



Praise good behaviour:

- Give plenty of positive encouragement: give cuddles, smile and praise.
- Avoid focusing on the 'unwanted' or 'problem' behaviour (e.g. not eating vegies; spitting out food).
- Praise at least one thing at every meal (e.g. "Good chewing"; "good eating of your vegies").

Forcing the issue

- Stay calm; never force feed your child.
- Try to avoid bribing your child with food. This teaches children that certain foods are more enjoyable and desirable than others. Phrases like "eat your peas or you will not get ice cream" tend to backfire over time. Children may consume a food to get the reward, but usually they end up disliking the food intensely!
- Avoid substituting favourite foods for uneaten meals. A skipped meal or two won't hurt a healthy child.
- Offer rewards other than food, such as a favourite game, a trip to the park, stickers or stamps for their collection.

What if they don't eat?

- If your child refuses a meal, stop and think about why this may be the case. Did they have a recent snack, or a drink? Are they ill or tired? Is there too much food on their plate?
- If your child eats poorly at a meal, wait until the next scheduled meal or snack before offering something new.
- Look at the big picture: have they only missed one meal today or one meal this week?
- Avoid substituting uneaten meals with other foods including milk / formula / yogurt / custard or chips & biscuits. Your child will soon learn that this is the reward for food refusal at meals.

For further information contact your Dietitian or Nutritionist:

References:
1. Nutrition Australia fact sheets; available: www.nutritionaustralia.org.au
2. Ellyn Satter Institute: <http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org>