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# Help My Child Won't Eat

A guide for  
parents  
and caregivers

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# Learning to eat

Learning to eat a wide variety of food begins in infancy and continues throughout childhood and adolescence. Just as children's personalities differ, their acceptance and willingness to try new foods can differ too. During the toddler years, food refusal and fussiness are particularly noticeable.

Young children may have a fear of all new foods and even refuse foods that they have eaten before. This is called the neophobic stage, and is thought to be a mechanism to protect them from eating foods that may be unsafe. Although this can be worrying for parents, fussy eating often resolves with time and can be helped by some simple mealtime strategies.



This booklet is designed to support parents when fussy eating is starting to become more challenging.

Occasionally fussy eating leads to more challenging feeding difficulties which may not resolve so easily and can affect a child's growth and development. Feeding difficulties can include not eating enough food, or only eating a very small variety of foods, which means children do not meet their nutritional needs. For families who have a child with feeding difficulties, mealtimes often become unpleasant and stressful experiences. Feeding difficulties can be more serious and managed differently from fussy eating.



# What is happening now?

The first stage in making any change is to understand what is happening now. Take some time to sit down with everyone who is involved in feeding your child and write down what is happening.

## Consider together:

Is there a regular pattern to meals and snacks?

- How often is food offered? Include food eaten throughout the day, not just mealtimes.
- How often and how much drink is given? Include all fluid (milk, juice, water) and any drinks given in the night.



Compare this to the meal and snack checklist to help you identify what changes are needed.

What happens at meal and snack times?

- Does your child feed themselves?
- Where do you sit at mealtimes?
- Who else is there?
- Do you eat with your child?
- What happens when your child refuses food? Does everyone manage this in the same way?

Use the managing mealtimes section to help you identify what changes will help.

It can be tempting to want to tackle everything at once but making lots of changes can be confusing and worrying for children and can often result in battles that feel impossible to overcome.

Change takes time and the best way to make a lasting change is to take small steps and make sure these are working successfully before moving on.

Consider which changes are the most important to make first

- Any changes made need to be consistent
- Include everyone involved with feeding your child
- It is important that your child always receives the same messages and is clear about what is expected of them

TOP TIP

Top tip



# Meal and snack checklist

What to offer?	Why?
<p data-bbox="104 229 359 296"><b>Three meals and three snacks a day</b></p> 	<p data-bbox="471 236 1000 335">Young children have high energy needs for growth but only have small tummies so they need frequent meals and snacks to get enough food.</p> <p data-bbox="471 376 992 576">Drinks, including milk, are filling and may reduce appetite for food. Milk is nutritious but should not replace meals. At one year of age aim for no more than 600ml of milk a day (including any drunk during the night) and avoid large drinks before or with meals.</p>
<p data-bbox="104 632 311 699"><b>Two courses at each meal</b></p>	<p data-bbox="471 639 947 703">This provides two opportunities to get enough energy and nutrients from that meal.</p> <p data-bbox="471 743 994 979">Avoid using dessert to bribe your child to eat other foods. This leads to children liking dessert more (because it is a reward) and other foods less! Offer both parts of a meal regardless of the amount that has been eaten in the first course. Nutritious dessert choices include yoghurt, custard pots, rice pudding and fruit.</p>
<p data-bbox="104 1034 314 1101"><b>An appropriate portion size</b></p> 	<p data-bbox="471 1042 1000 1174">It can be tricky to judge how much to give your child, so aim to give a small portion and offer more if it is finished. It can help to use your child's hand size to guide you:</p> <ul data-bbox="471 1214 1005 1417" style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fist-sized portion for carbohydrates (pasta, rice, potato, bread, grains, for example cous cous)</li><li>• Palm-sized portion for protein (meat, fish, beans, vegetarian alternatives)</li><li>• The amount their cupped hand can hold for vegetables and fruit</li></ul>

## Make food easy to eat



Young children can get tired quickly if they have to work hard to eat and chew. They find meat and other protein based food easier if soft and moist. Offer foods such as egg bread, omelettes, dishes made with minced meat/soya mince, tuna mayonnaise, hummus or nut butter on fingers of toast or small sausages/vegetarian sausages.

Finger foods are often easier to manage than cutlery. Encourage your child to feed themselves and get messy in the process. This is an important part of learning about and accepting new foods and textures.

## As much energy as possible

When children are underweight and eating only small amounts they will need as much energy as possible in the food you give them. Avoid using low fat or low sugar foods and offer foods high in energy, such as cheese, creamy sauces, nut butters, avocado, eggs, ice-cream and puddings. Add energy to food by adding extra butter or full fat spread to potatoes and vegetables, and add cream and sugar to sauces, desserts and breakfast cereals. If there are any high energy foods that your child likes, regularly provide these at meal or snack times.

If your child is not gaining enough weight, in the short term, sufficient energy is more important than variety or promoting good eating habits.

