

Fussy eating:

How to help a child
to accept new foods



For parents, carers, family and other close adults.

How to use this booklet

We believe if you encourage your child to interact with foods, without the pressure to try them, that eating can become fun and rewarding.

We know that this is a process that can be challenging for both the parent/carer and the child. Start off slowly, by putting into practice one or two strategies in this booklet. Try to make it a part of your everyday routine so that it all becomes normal for everyone.

Progress can differ from child to child, and the advice and strategies in this booklet should be tried for at least 6 months to be sure if they are working or not.

Remember to celebrate any progress, whether big or small.

Why might a child avoid trying new foods?

A lot of children don't like tasting new and unfamiliar foods. This is called food neophobia. It's a part of normal development and many children go through this phase. It can start soon after the child's first birthday and can continue until school age.

Children may refuse to taste new foods that look 'different'. This might be a food that has a colour, shape, or texture that they aren't familiar with.

Some children may be sensitive to certain sensations such as smell, touch and taste. It might mean that they don't want to touch certain food textures with their hands.

Some children may have a negative association with feeding. This includes those who have spent a long time in hospital as babies, or have suffered from reflux, allergies, or have had a period of being fed by tube. They may associate eating with pain, discomfort, or an adverse reaction. Sometimes this can mean that introducing solid food to them was delayed, and the window of opportunity for introducing tastes and textures during the first year of life has been missed, and could be the cause of later food avoidance.

Children become gradually better at trying foods as they get older



First steps: encourage your child to accept new food

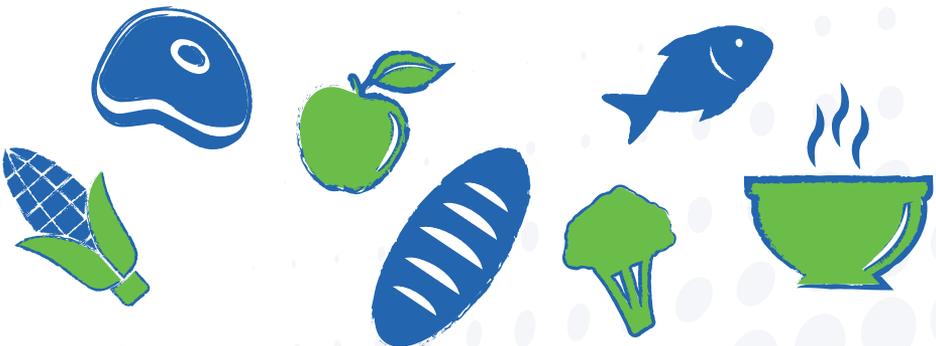
Did you know that a new food can take up to 14-20 times to be accepted? Keep offering the food, and don't give up until you've offered it at least 20 times. It might be helpful to keep a record of the food you've offered.

Try not to rush this process.

- Introduce new foods gradually. Try one food at a time and offer a small portion such as one carrot stick or quarter of an apple. A large portion may put the child off trying.
- New foods should be offered on a separate plate and away from accepted foods; dividing plates are great for this.
- Involving your child in choosing and preparing foods can encourage their interest.
- Let them see different foods in different environments such as in the kitchen, at mealtimes, at nursery or school and in shops.
- Encourage your child to explore food through play. This will help them to become more familiar with the sensation of food and eating.

Try and get creative, there's lots of great ways to introduce the idea of new foods to your child. You could do some activities to help your child learn more about food such as growing vegetables, cooking with new and different food, and reading and singing about foods.

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Moving on: expanding their range of accepted foods

Change one feature of the preferred food at a time such as the shape, colour, taste, or texture to help expand their list of accepted foods. The goal is not to change the food completely. You may need to start with a very small change, and build up gradually. Here are some ideas for how to do this:

- Change the food's shape by using food cutters
- Change the colour of the food with food colouring
- Change the taste just slightly by adding a small amount of something like spice powder or syrup
- Change the texture, from mashed up foods to soft finger foods; for example, move from mashed potato to a piece of boiled potato
- Try different brands or new flavours of their preferred food

Let your child spit the food out if they don't like the taste or texture. Offer it again at another time and persevere as it's part of food acceptance.

Start with small changes and build up gradually.

Create a positive mealtime environment

Children love to copy so it's important that they see good role models. Try to eat together so that they can see you and the rest of the family eating a variety of foods.

If you feel yourself becoming stressed or upset at mealtimes, have a break away from your child if it's safe to do so. It may be useful to rotate feeding and mealtimes with other adults or older siblings if you can.

Establish a routine

It's important to establish a routine for meal and snack times. Aim for three meals and two or three snacks spaced out throughout the day. Frequent snacking or drinking milk could reduce their appetite and make them less willing to try new foods. Get prepared so your child knows that mealtime is coming. Ask your child to:

- Wash their hands
- Help prepare the food
- Help set the table

Using relaxation strategies with your child before mealtimes can also be helpful. You could try using breathing techniques, listening to calming music, doodling/drawing, or just having some quiet time.

During mealtimes

Getting your child to feel relaxed during mealtimes can really help with eating. Limit distractions at mealtimes like loud noise, bright lights or television to keep their focus. Check they're sitting comfortably and their feet can touch the floor. If they can't, they may need a step to rest their feet on.

If they find it hard to use cutlery, let them eat with their hands. This added stress can put them off eating.

If your child is fidgety or finds it difficult to sit down at mealtimes try:

- Encouraging them to do some movement activities before sitting down. This could be marching, jumping on the spot or on a trampoline, bouncing on a gym ball, doing some wall or chair push-ups, carrying or moving boxes of toys.
- Placing a wobble cushion on their seat to provide some gentle movement while they're sitting at the table. Look at: sensorydirect.com/wobble-cushion-junior

To keep their interest, limit main meals to 30 minutes and snacks to 15 minutes. For some children a timer or clock can help so that they know they don't have to be there too long!

Keep a calm and comfortable environment during mealtimes

Praise and reward

It's important to praise your child to recognise they've made progress, no matter how small it is.

Using a non-food-based reward such as a sticker chart, and offering a favourite activity as a reward to acknowledge positive attempts or progress can really help encourage some children by giving them a sense of pride.



Sensory play

Sensory play gives your child the chance to use their senses such as touch, smell and sight to explore and interact with food and non-food materials. In time this can increase their tolerance to certain textures, smells or tastes.

Sensory play involving food should take place away from the mealtime environment. Don't pressure or force your child to taste or eat the food. Allow your child to explore at their own pace and if they don't tolerate a certain activity, remove it – but do try again another day.

Begin with dry, coarser textures (such as cereals, dried rice, or lentils) then gradually introduce wet and sticky textures eg playdough, sand, finger paint, shaving foam, powder, jelly etc.

Remember sensory play is a time for you and your child to explore and have fun!

Here are some ideas to try:

- **Find hidden objects** in a box of sand, such as dry rice, lentils, pasta or packing foam
- **Food art:** use foods for printing eg shapes cut from vegetables, and use sauces such as tomato sauce, gravy or yogurt as "paint"
- **Cooking:** rolling and kneading dough and pastry, cutting out and pressing into baking trays or moulds
- **Jewellery making:** make a bracelet or necklace using dry foods such as pasta or Cheerios
- **Feely box/bag:** feel for objects inside the box or bag without looking. Start with familiar objects with different shapes or textures, and then try objects with similar shapes or textures
- **Play outside:** play with sand or mud, walk barefoot on grass or sand, or collect different textured leaves
- **Play some games that require blowing or sucking,** such as whistles and other musical instruments, blowing up balloons, blowing bubbles using a plastic tube or straw in a small bucket of water with a few drops of dish soap

Be aware of any allergies and intolerances. Younger children must always be supervised by an adult.



Maintaining adequate growth and nutrition

Most children continue to grow well despite having a limited diet. But the following strategies can help to maintain healthy growth and weight.

- Include items from each of the main food groups at each meal: carbohydrate, protein and fruit and/or vegetables.
- Offer age-appropriate portion sizes. Offering too much on a plate can feel overwhelming for some children. Using the child's hand as a guide can be useful: a fist size portion of carbohydrate (rice, pasta or potato), a palm size portion of protein (chicken, meat, fish, lentils) and a fist size portion of fruit and/or vegetables.
- Allow your child to eat their preferred foods to help maintain their weight.

The following strategies can help to provide enough vitamins and minerals.

- Give an age-appropriate multivitamin with iron as early as possible. There are many over the counter options to choose from and your child may prefer one kind more than others. It can be liquid, chewy sweet, sprinkle or spray.
- If they're finding it difficult to take their multivitamin, try including it in an already established routine such as bedtime, or giving it at the same time as other medications. If they initially refuse their supplement, keep trying as children will often accept it if they see it as part of their routine, just as you would give a medication. Do not give the supplement at mealtimes and/or in the same place that food is eaten.
- Incorporate foods that have been fortified with additional multivitamins eg most shop-bought cereals, bread (Kingsmill 50/50 Vitamin Boost), milk (Arla Big Milk) and squash (Capri Sun Multivitamin Squash). This is not an exclusive list and other products may be available in your local supermarket.
- Experiment with fruits and vegetables. You can use fresh, frozen, dried or tinned. You can also try:
 - Giving your child a fruit smoothie with blended fruit at breakfast or snack times
 - Turning fruit smoothies into ice lollies
 - Including fruit or vegetables in homemade cakes, muffins or brownies
 - Making baked vegetable crisps such as carrot, sweet potato, swede or parsnip chips as an alternative to fried potato crisps
 - Including grated vegetables into pasta sauces, soups, stews or gravies

Unhelpful strategies

- Pressurising a child to eat can lead to negative behaviours around food and mealtimes
- Never force feed a child
- Don't give too much direction and instructions when eating, try and let your child eat at their own pace
- Don't hide or disguise foods as this can lead to distrust and avoidance
- Never leave your child to go hungry in the hope that they will eat
- Don't reward them with other preferred foods as it will devalue the new or non-preferred foods
- Don't let your child have more than three snacks per day or drink a lot of fluid before or during meals as this can fill up their tummy and make them less willing to try and eat new foods

When to seek further help

Contact a healthcare professional such as GP, health visitor or school nurse if you have any concerns about the following:

- Weight loss or dropping weight centiles
- Showing signs or diagnosis of specific nutrient deficiencies eg iron deficiency
- Choking or coughing during mealtimes
- Wet sounding voice or change in breathing during mealtimes
- Frequent chest infections
- Avoiding more foods despite implementing the above advice for at least 6 months

Helpful links

Scan the QR codes below to visit the Berkshire Healthcare website to find information on:

Body awareness and
body positioning



Help with
finger feeding



Scan the QR codes below
to watch on YouTube:

Selective Eating:
Nutrition video



Selective Eating:
Progressing through
textures video



Selective Eating:
The Senses video



This booklet was created by a Children Young People and Families multidisciplinary working group consisting of a Dietitian, Occupational Therapist and Speech and Language Therapist.



www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk