

# the early years toolkit

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## Trying new foods

### Why do some children find this difficult?

All typically developing children are suspicious of trying new foods between the ages of two and five. Some children are even more resistant and can become very upset. We call this developmental stage 'Food Neophobia' which means 'fear of new foods'.

As a result of this reaction to new foods, adults can fall into the trap of offering foods that the child prefers and so the child's diet can become limited in variety over time. Young children often like things to be the same and are not keen on new things. Children with developmental difficulties often also need this and can therefore be more resistant to trying new foods so that this stage may last for much longer. The risk with eating a limited diet, especially if important food groups like fruit and vegetables are missing, is that it may lead to nutritional deficiencies or health problems.

### What you may see

- Your child may become very upset when asked to eat new or unfamiliar foods.
- Your child may refuse a previously accepted food and claim they no longer like it.
- Their diet may become more restricted over time so they only eat a few key foods.
- Whole food groups, for example dairy or vegetables, may be absent from their diet.
- Mealtimes may become very stressful for the whole family.

### Strategies and Advice

- Try to stick to regular, consistent mealtimes. This allows your child to become hungry before the meal so they are more ready to eat.
- Try to have a particular place for eating meals, for example the kitchen table. Children are often happier sitting in a comfortable chair and are less likely to leave the table.

- Motivate your child by giving them positive attention during the meal. If possible, try to eat at the same time as them but be careful not to nag them to eat.
- Use cutlery and crockery that they find interesting at each meal, possibly with favourite cartoon characters. This will give them consistency and will be comfortable for them to hold and use.
- Offer very small servings of the new food alongside food they like on the plate. Offer praise for any attempts to explore it before eating.
- Offer the new food regularly at intervals so that your child remembers what it is. If necessary, take a photo so they can see what it is and to reassure them they have had it before.
- If your child is very resistant to trying the new food or becomes upset, you may need to offer an immediate reward or motivator. There is no harm in having two spoons of the new food and their favourite food and offering the favourite food right after they have the new food in their mouth. They will be less likely to spit it out if they have a mouthful of their favourite food!
- Avoid trickery or hiding new foods with some children. It works for some but, if you find it doesn't, avoid doing this. Some children lose trust in their feeders and it is better if they know and understand that it is a new food. The danger of tricking them is they will stop eating the food you have been using to hide the new food.
- Try to eat the new food with your child, making it clear from what you say and your facial expression that the food is lovely and not to be feared.
- Allow your child to use all their senses to explore the new food, just as you would if you were looking for food on a desert island. For them, even Tuna pasta may be as scary as eating wild grubs! Below are the stages that children may need to go through before they can successfully eat and swallow a new food:
  - Looking at the food, either while it is on your plate or on the table. Progressing to it being on their plate.
  - Smelling the new food, either while it is on the plate or as they pick it up and examine it.
  - Touching the new food to test its texture. A wash cloth to hand if you don't like mess.
  - Licking the food to see if it initially tastes OK.
  - Biting off a small piece. This may be followed by spitting it out if the first taste or bite doesn't feel good. Have something for them to spit into if they need to do this.

- Biting off, chewing and then finally swallowing.
- Time for the taste to eventually become a portion.
- It can take children up to 30 exposures to finally get to like a food. Equally they may accept new foods straight away.
- Be relaxed and look for fun times to try foods where the emphasis is not on the mealtime, for example at a party, picnic or snack time.
- Don't stop offering foods that have been refused. Just keep offering the food and wait for the fad to pass and for your child to start eating it again.

If your child is still very resistant and major food groups are absent from their diet after using this Advice Sheet for six months, please discuss this with your Health Visitor who may recommend that you contact CYPIT for further advice.