

Fussy eating can not only turn the day-to-day planning of meals into a real headache for parents - it can take its toll on the social aspects of life. Going around to a friend's house, out for a meal or on holiday can all become problematic when the question of what to eat rears its head. This fact sheet sets out to offer advice and tips on how to combat fussy eating.

Underlying Reasons

So, first up - are there any underlying reasons behind the fussiness? A whole host of day-to-day factors can actually contribute to children being fussy about what they eat (Table 1). As parents we are often blinded to these. So, some subtle changes may help to make a real difference. Here are a few examples...



Are they filling up?	If your child is filling up on milk or having more than 2-3 snacks a day they may be too full for mealtimes.
Are they at their best?	Is your child too tired to eat well or over hungry?
Are portion sizes realistic?	If portions are too large children can feel overwhelmed. Smaller portions work better for little tummies.
Are treats being glorified?	Eat this and you'll get pudding! Young minds read this as "yippee, I'll go straight to the pudding!"
Are they feeling the pressure?	Pressure can create upset. Try to relax at mealtimes and take the pressure off.
Are they preoccupied?	If there is too much going on this can cause them to be too distracted to eat.
Are they following a good role model?	Be it you or their friends that are great eaters, rolemodelling can help knock fussy eating on the head.

Source: Adapted from NHS Choices¹

Strategies

Fussy eating can be REALLY COMPLEX and as we've said before every child is different. So, for now we have compiled three key areas that can be worked on and supplemented these with some more generic tips. We wish you the best of luck - keep going and if you're still having problems you might find the answer over on our forum discussions.



1 Family Food Time

There is a bundle of evidence to show that there is value in eating together as a family. This is a good time to #talkfood, connect and catch up on the day's events² You can also have some really good fun with your child at mealtimes, and there are plenty of ways to do this (Table 2).



Table 2: Creating #foodfun

Educate them	Did you know cheese helps your bones to grow? Green vegetables give you energy to run really fast. Drinking water helps your brain to think...
Involve them	Once children are aged 3-4 years they like to have some independence. Ask them to help set out the table and serve up some of the foods.
Magic powers	Give foods a character and magic powers. So boring old water can be Elsa's ice water (yes, from Disney's Frozen) and suddenly it has a whole new appeal.
Name foods	This can get children's imaginations going and quite often lead to some hilarious surprises.
Theme nights	These can be a real winner. So whatever they love - integrate it around the table and you're already off to a great start.

2 Food Structure

We do it with sleep, we do it with daily routines and now we need to do it with food too. Food structure is just so important. A daily routine of the following is recommended for young children alongside giving them their usual milk³

- Children aged 6-8 months – foods 2-3 times a day
- Children aged 9-11 months – foods 3-4 times a day
- Children aged 12-24 months – foods 3-4 meals daily and 1-2 nutritious snacks

Research also backs up the importance of having structured mealtimes. Where meals are more structured, children are less fussy. When mums eat with their children there is less food fussiness about too and when there are no distractions such as the television or toys at mealtimes, children have been found to be less fussy once again⁴



3 Don't Give Up

Never stop offering the rejected foods entirely. Giving the same food up to 10 to 15 times, over time, can eventually lead to its acceptance⁵. Many parents when they encounter a food being rejected by their child, avoid offering that food again – even indefinitely. Children's experimenting is likely to change from one day to the next. A food that is accepted one day may be rejected on another. This is really important as not offering rejected foods can, over time, leave your child with an extremely limited diet.

CONCLUSIONS

Combatting fussy eating takes time. Unfortunately, there is no magic solution. The reality is it can be a lot of hard work. About half of young children who are fussy will grow out of it. For the rest it's worth screening for any underlying factors. In addition to this, try not to give in to it. Keep giving the foods that you prepare in different ways. Persistence is key to helping break the cycle of fussy eating.

Top Tips for Coping with Fussy Foodies

- 1** Take the pressure off. If you are relaxed then they will be too.
- 2** Avoid letting children eat too many snacks in between meals. A daily snack log can be helpful to keep track.
- 3** Focus your attention on the positive eating behaviours rather than the negative.
- 4** Avoid offering alternatives at mealtimes and stick with the meals you had planned. If they don't want it that's fine but don't give them anything else.
- 5** Offer realistic portion sizes for small tummies. Big portions can be overwhelming and off-putting.
- 6** Avoid giving meals when your child may be too tired to eat. If they are eating slowly and struggling ask if they need help.
- 7** Never use food as a reward – eat this and you can have a nice pudding!
This devalues what you are giving them.



Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

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Further Information: www.littlefoodie.org

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