



Fussy Eating

Everyone has foods they like and don't like, including children. These food preferences will change over time. Fussy eating is expected in all children, some of the time. Lots of factors can influence eating, including how hungry a child is, how well they are, if they are upset, and food preferences.

Pressuring a child to eat increases fussy eating. This includes coaxing (e.g. 'just one more'), bribes, punishments, and rewards. If meal times are becoming a battle, the fussy eating seems never ending or getting worse, or your child is not eating similar foods to their same age peers, change may help. This handout describes some basic strategies for managing fussy eating at home. This handout does not specifically cover sensory or behaviour difficulties. **Consult a health professional if you have concerns.**

Play and learn... about food



Play...with food and eating

Playing and experimenting with new food before eating it is normal. Allow your child to test how the food looks, feels, smells, without pressure to eat it.

- Go outside or put down a splat mat or towel so it's easier to clean up
- Choose a time when everyone is calm
- Not every meal has to be a new experience
- Allow preferred foods too so they can eat if they are hungry
- Does your child prefer to use their hands, or do they like cutlery?



Model...with food and eating

Share meals together. If this is hard in the evening, do this at breakfast or lunch. Eating is not just about food but about sharing and being together.

- Eat in front of your child
- Have some of the food first before offering it to your child
- Give your child some food and then ignore your child while they decide if they will eat something
- Eat with someone different like a grandparent, aunt, or cousin



Learn...about food and eating

Learning about and experiencing food in new (and less stressful) ways can help reduce challenging behaviours around mealtimes.

- Serve food from shared plates or platters
- Have children help prepare or cook food (with age appropriate tasks)
- Look at recipes in books or online and choose foods to try together
- Grow foods in the garden or use pots or indoor kits
- Try new foods with more flavour



Fussy eating... common problems

Too much milk or juice?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend about 1.5 serves of dairy per day for toddlers. (1 serve is 250mls milk OR 200g yoghurt OR 2 slices of cheese). For example, 1.5 serves is 250mls milk + 100g yoghurt.

If your toddler is drinking a lot more than 500mls of milk/juice a day and is fussy with food, consider reducing the amount of milk/juice they are drinking. Does this improve their eating?

Doesn't like lumps?

Lumps are not an essential step in learning to eat. Skip lumps and go straight to soft finger foods (such as banana, pieces of cooked sweet potato or pumpkin, pikelets, cheese slices) or dissolvable solids (such as yoghurt buttons, freeze dried fruit, milk arrowroot biscuits). Allow your child to feed themselves.

Meals are a battle?

Forcing or pressuring your child to eat may win today but make meal times an ongoing battle.

Ignore challenging behaviour where possible. If you can and it is encouraging for your child, praise and pay attention to behaviour you want to see more of. Sometimes, any attention on eating (praise or pressure) can be negative for a child and they will eat less.

Instead of focussing on the amount or type of feed eaten, focus on improving the eating experience for everyone in the family. Eating doesn't have to get better today or this week. Make small steps towards the long term goal of trusting each other, your child trusting their own body and needs, being happy to share a meal, and trying a wider variety of foods.

What next?

A child who has difficulty eating can be stressful for you, your child, and your family. If these strategies haven't worked or you still have concerns, speak to your child and family health nurse, family doctor/GP, or speech pathologist.