

Selective Eating Advice

This advice sheet has been compiled from various sources listed at the bottom of this document.

All children can go through a phase of 'fussy' or selective eating, this is a normal part of child development known as neophobia. It usually peaks around 20 months and diminishes by age 8. However for some children it can remain an area of difficulty, particularly children with developmental delay or special educational needs.



It is usually overcome by exposure, including watching and imitating adults and other children, and time.

It is also important to remember that children may regulate their appetite over a week or longer so when considering how much a child is eating it is useful to look at it over a longer period of time.

Please consider how ready you are as a family to address your child's feeding difficulties. Increasing your child's repertoire of foods will take perseverance, patience and consistency. You need to ensure this is the right time for you to begin implementing strategies. If not, it can always be revisited at a later date when you feel more ready.

Please seek advice from the relevant health professional i.e. GP, Dietician or Dysphagia team if your child has any of the following:

- Drops two centiles on their growth chart or has been identified as having faltering growth by a health professional
- Is frequently ill
- Is lethargic and inactive
- Has been diagnosed with a vitamin or mineral deficiency
- Persistent constipation
- Anaemia, reflux or swallowing difficulties
- Dental issues
- Allergies



Strategies that may increase food acceptance

Allowing preferred foods

- Children can regulate their dietary intake in accordance with their growth needs with a narrow range of foods



- Allowing preferred foods can help minimise weight loss
- Allow the child to eat their safe/preferred foods, ensuring there is something at every meal time that you know that they like
- Avoid messing with safe foods, for example hiding foods in other foods as this may lead to them rejecting a food they would previously have accepted as they may see it as contaminated
- Using nutritional supplements can help minimise nutritional deficiency (see your GP or dietician for support with this).

- Be aware that sugar suppresses the appetite.

Reduce anxiety and mealtime stress

- Allow as much choice as possible to let the child feel some control
- Avoid force feeding, rewarding and hiding:
 - May lead to anxiety and loss of appetite/vomiting
 - Food used as rewards becomes more desirable than food they are eating
 - If disliked foods touch safe foods they may not eat; children like to see what they are eating
 - May lose trust and reject 'safe' foods
 - Although giving stickers for trying a new food away from a meal time might encourage a child to try a new food especially if an adult is doing it too
- Try to reduce your anxiety about their eating, they are more likely to eat if everyone around them is calm
- They may eat more if parents attend to them by talking or smiling while they are eating
- They are likely to eat less if parents give them more attention when they stop eating
- Do not discuss food intake in front of the child
- Consider the language you use about food. There are no good or bad foods, all provide nutrition and are a stepping stones to more complex foods. If a child tries something they don't like, think about your response e.g. - 'That's ok, you are still learning about this food'.
- Distraction e.g. TV or iPad can help reduce hyper vigilance and anxiety, as long as the child is on task and eating

Schedule regular eating times

- Try to stick to a daily routine of 3 meals with 2-3 planned snacks evenly spaced out between the meals
- Have biscuits or sweets as part of a snack or meal and not in between these times
- Keep mealtimes short, no more than 30 minutes, limit snack times to 10 minutes
- Do not leave long gaps between meals to make the child more hungry as this is not likely to work



Consider fluid intake

- Milk and sweet drinks can suppress appetite
- Offer with meals and snacks
- Give water between meals and snacks if they ask for it
- Aim for 6-8 drinks per day, up to 120ml in a cup for toddlers
- Aim to phase out feeding bottles by 12 months
- Night time feeding should be avoided as this reduced appetite for food during the day



toddlers

Manage mealtimes



- Involve child in shopping and preparing food and the mealtime environment e.g. putting things on the table
- Avoid branded packaging wherever possible, or so child doesn't see e.g. take cornflakes out of cardboard box and get rid of box
- Offer small portions and offer more if finished
- Provide finger foods as often as possible
- Do not rush a meal
- Always offer something child will eat at every meal but also offer foods that you and others are eating, if you offer a new food and child is over sensitive, offer this on a separate plate
- Offer two courses, savoury followed by sweet, as this offers increased chance for calorie intake as well as being more interesting and offering variety
- Change the venue of meals, e.g. picnic outside or carpet picnic
- If possible provide opportunities to eat with other children who eat well
- If your child dislikes the presentation of foods being mixed on a plate serve their portion separated out
- Provide condiments if this helps your child eat more, these can always be reduced later on
- Praise when child eats well
- Only use positive comments about food
- Take away uneaten food without comment
- If food is refused keep offering at subsequent meals – food tastes change over time, you may need to offer new tastes more than 15 times before they accept them
- Do not take a food away and offer an alternative
- Do not give a snack soon after a meal if they have not eaten the meal



Increasing sensory tolerance to food

The sensory environment is important at mealtimes e.g. sensations of taste, texture, temperature, smell, sound and the reactions of others in the room.

Before eating you could try:

- Slow rocking games (slow, repetitive motion)
- Heavy work activities such as:
 - Tidying up toys
 - Carrying juice carton or jug of water to the table
- Deep pressure such as:
 - Firm hugs if they will tolerate
 - Chewing on chewellery
 - Washing hands using firm pressure
 - Rub and massage the child's face, with a cloth that the child likes to gradually decrease sensitivity







Texture

- Give more calories in food textures they like, do not refuse high calorie foods e.g. ice cream, cakes and biscuits
- Continue to give pureed or soft food that your child likes and gradually introduce more solids in small amounts
- Begin with easier textures, see texture progression list below
- Do not mix textures such as yogurt with bits of fruit

Texture Progression

Below are the stages which children usually move through when they are weaning. If your child is still only eating pureed or mashed food, gradually work through these stages, giving them small amounts of food at a time. This is for children who do not have any swallowing difficulties, if you think your child does have difficulty chewing and swallowing foods, they should be referred to the dysphagia team.

- Pureed – Quite runny or smooth with no lumps e.g. yoghurt 
- Minced and moist - Fairly smooth with small soft lumps, mashed with a fork rather than pureed e.g. scrambled egg, mashed banana, mashed baked beans, steamed fish.
- Bite and dissolve finger foods (soft and bite sized) - These dissolve in the mouth and do not need any chewing e.g. Wotsits, meringue, monster munch, rice cakes, ice cream wafers 
- Bite and melt finger foods (soft and bite sized) – These dissolve but coat the mouth more e.g. chocolate (malteasers cut into quarters, chocolate buttons)
- Bite and soft chew (soft and bite sized) - sandwiches with soft spread, fishcakes, very ripe peeled fruit, e.g. pear, melon, avocado, peeled grapes cut in half, soft pieces of cooked potato, sweet potato, beetroot, soft chips, cooked florets of cauliflower or broccoli, mini pasta shapes, soft biscuits, e.g. malted milk, rich tea, digestives, sandwiches made with soft white bread (crust off) and smooth fillings e.g. cheese spread, marmite, hummus. 
- Bite and splinter (regular) – breadsticks, cream crackers, crisps 
- Bite and lump (regular) - raw apple, chicken nuggets, crusty bread, pizza, sausages

Temperature

Consider the temperature of the food. The child may only be able to tolerate one or two food temperatures or prefer hot or cold foods.

Think about the mealtime environment

- Does the child need a quiet space or distraction
- Would they prefer to use ear defenders or preferred music in the background
- Are the other children too loud or eating disliked foods
- School halls can be loud and overwhelming. Would eating somewhere else be easier to tolerate.



Get messy

- Try providing deep pressure massage to hands prior to messy play to help prepare and desensitise
- Graded exposure, start with textures that child can tolerate and then gradually change i.e. firmer textures moving onto stickier/wetter
- Encourage exploration of different textures during mealtimes and play



- It is easier to tolerate mess on hands than on face so this is generally a good place to start
- Keep a flannel near to them so they can wipe hands if they want to at mealtimes
- Encourage short messy play sessions every day away from mealtimes
- Playgroups or pre-schools are great for messy play opportunities if you are not able to provide these at home
- Bin liners, old sheets or newspapers will protect the floor if it is a messy process.

Food play

- Encourage children to organise food by colour, shapes and sizes
- Pretend to feed dolly or teddy, give them pots and pans, plastic food etc.
- Make necklaces with dried pasta or cooked pasta
- Provide opportunities for messy play e.g. paint, playdoh, sand, water, glue, slime, cornflour and water mixture
- Messy play with food - exploring dry and cooked pasta, cornflour, rice, dry and cooked couscous, baked beans etc. If a child is particularly reluctant to engage in messy play, it's usually best to start with dry foods first



- Drive cars through cereal, mash, gravy, custard, jelly etc.
- Hide small toys in dried lentils/baked beans/mash/custard and have them find and pick them out with their fingers
- Hand painting with custard, mousse, yoghurt
- Drawing with fingers in sauce

- Making collages by sticking dry food items such as crisps and cereals to pictures with sticky sauces as glue
- Use cooked spaghetti as hair on a paper plate face
- Fill a large tub/bucket with icing sugar and encourage the child to pour in coloured water to see what happens, let them be in control. They may just lick their lips, fingers without realising. Play with toys in the icing sugar ('Oh no, the car is stuck in the snow')
- Potato stamping
- Decorating biscuits
- Make your own pizza
- Play with edible paints, painting hands and arms and gradually moving up to the face



Play to develop oral motor skills

Some children struggle to develop oral-motor skills i.e. movement of the mouth, lips, tongue, cheeks and jaw. This includes biting, chewing, licking and sucking. You could try doing the following ideas in front of a mirror so the child can see the movements they are making with their mouths:

- Count teeth with tongue moving the tongue all around the mouth
- Take it in turns to give instructions to each other to do with the mouth e.g. stick out tongue, make tongue jump from one cheek to the other
- Play with toys that encourage development of oral motor skills e.g. whistles, bubble wands, kazoos, sucking lollies, blow balloons, use a straw to play blow football with peas
- Vibrating toothbrush – look at manufacture's guidelines for minimum age.



Approaches to developing eating

Steps to eating

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These are steps to introducing new foods:

1. Tolerates

- Being in the same room
- Sitting at the table with the food but away from child
- Sitting at the table with the food in own space

2. Interacts

- Helps with the preparation with food
- Uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink for others
- Uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink for self

3. Smells

- Happy with odour in room
- Happy with odour at the table
- Happy with the odour in own immediate space
- Leans down or picks up food to smell

4. Touch

- Touch food with finger tip
- Touch food with whole hand
- Tolerates food under nose
- Happy with food touching chin
- Happy with food touching lips
- Happy with food touching teeth
- Happy with food touching the tip of the tongue, top of the tongue

5. Taste / Eating

- Happy to lick food
- Bites and spits out immediately
- Bites and holds in mouth for a few seconds
- Bites chews and spits out
- Chews swallows some and spits out
- Chews swallows all with a drink
- Chews swallows all without a drink

Step by step guide to food acceptance

This approach offers a structured way of working through the steps to eating and is similar to the Tiny Tastes programme described below.

Step 1

- Choose a new food. Put a tiny amount (size of finger nail or less) of the new food on to your child's plate.
- Remember to put the new food in the same place on the plate each time, ensuring it does not touch accepted foods.
- If putting the new food on the same plate as accepted foods causes any upset, put on a separate plate at the side.

Step 2

- Encourage your child to smell the new food on the plate.
- Get involved by smelling the food too – your child may copy!

Step 3

- Encourage your child to pick up the new food with a fork or spoon.
- Again, your child will not usually try to eat the food at this stage.

Step 4

- Encourage your child to touch the new food with their fingers.

Step 5

- Then encourage your child to pick up the new food with their fingers.

Step 6

- Encourage your child to touch the food to their face, then to their lips ('kiss the food') and then to their tongue.
- Do this at a rate that suits your child – some children may do all steps at one mealtime, others will take several!

Step 7

- Encourage your child to lick the new food then put in their mouth (they can remove without chewing and swallowing – this step allows them to experience the taste and feel of the food in their mouth).

Step 8

- Encourage your child to bite, chew and then swallow a very small amount of the food.

Step 9

- Finally - gradually increase the amount of food eaten but to no more than a 'normal' portion. The food then becomes an accepted food for your child.
- Then start the process all over again with another new food!

Tiny tastes

- There is a pack to work through, available to purchase online:
- Choose a vegetable that you would like your child to eat and that you usually have in the house

- Tell your child that you are going to play a tasting game at snack time (or when s/he is moderately hungry)
- Show your child the whole vegetable, name it and say that you are both going to have a tiny taste of it
- Cut a very small piece for yourself and a similar one for your child
- Try your piece and say how delicious it is
- Ask your child to taste their piece (if they won't, tell them they can spit it out if they really don't like it)
- Give abundant praise if s/he tastes it
- Repeat with the same vegetable every day for 10 days minimum, up to 15 days

Food ladder

- Use a picture of a ladder to move up as they try new foods, with a different task to do with the same piece of food at each level of the ladder. Starting at the bottom and moving up the ladder with;
 - Look
 - Touch
 - Smell
 - Kiss/touch to lips
 - Lick
 - Nibble
 - Chew
 - Swallow – into tummy
- Child gets a tick/smiley face/sticker in the box next to each thing he tries with the food. Try two different foods in each session, with one food being one they already know and like. This will ensure that the child always has some success.
- Do not do this at meal times, meal times need to be safe and about getting the nutrition they need.

Food chaining

- Identify 'safe'/acceptable foods.
- Identify other foods with similar sensory properties e.g. same colour, same shape.
- Introduce very small changes.
- Be careful not to contaminate safe foods.
- Likely to take multiple attempts.
- No expectation but praise if happens.
- It may take a very long time and very small steps for your child to tolerate new food. You need to persevere and be consistent with your methods. Try the same variation of food item for several meals
- Examples
 - White bread → white bread in a different shape (change the shape .e.g. if always has triangles try squares) 50/50 bread → brown bread (no seeds) → brown roll → muffin
 - McDonald's French Fries → different brands → different sizes → chips → wedges → potato smiles → waffles → baked potato → mashed potato

Other resources

Books for parents:

- Raising a healthy, happy eater: A stage by stage guide to setting your child on the path to adventurous eating. By Nimali Fernando, Melanie Potock

- Food refusal and Avoidant Eating in Children, including those with Autism Spectrum Conditions. A practical guide for parents and professionals. By Gillian Harris and Elizabeth Shea.

Books for children:

- Eat your Greens Goldilocks By Steve Smallman.
- Good Enough to Eat By Lizzy Rockwell.



Websites:

- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/healthy-lifestyles/eat-better/fussy-eaters/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/fussy-eaters>
- <https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/resources/ot-activityinformation-sheets/fussy-eaters/>
- <https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/early-years-development/health-and-development/coping-with-fussy-eaters>
- <https://publicdocuments.sth.nhs.uk/pil4379.pdf>

Goals

Please take some time to think about what your goals are in terms of your child's eating. Be specific and realistic to ensure they are achievable. Consider short term goals to help focus your approach. See examples below:

- Charlie to tolerate having vegetables on his plate
- Tom to be able to touch wet foods with his fingers
- Claire to try a bite and melt finger food.
- Mum/Dad to review strategies before mealtimes to help reduce anxiety
- Mum/Dad to model positive attitude to food at mealtimes by smiling and vocalising likes.

Goal:

Now write down which strategies from above you are going to use to help you achieve your goals:
