



Background

The term 'fussy eater' is often used but is not always a helpful description as it tends to ignore the very real challenges that some children and families can face when it comes to mealtimes. While this may feel like this problem will never resolve, there is hope. First of all, be comforted this behaviour is completely normal and children usually grow out of it in time. It is very easy to compare your child to other children their age who don't seem to have any issues with food but it is actually a very common concern we hear in clinic from parents. Secondly there are many things that you can do to help your child. Parents play an important role in a child's development of feeding behaviours. Parents shape the early feeding environment which influences the development of child eating patterns, which in turn are key determinants of life-long eating habits and associated health outcomes.

When you start noticing changes to intake

If you are worried about your child's dietary intake, it may be useful to keep a food diary and note:

- What they ate and the amount they ate
- What time of day they ate
- Where they ate and who was there

It may also be useful to note other factors e.g. distractions, did they eat off their favourite plate, were they in a busy/noisy school dining hall. Although some children have a restricted diet, it can still be a healthy diet.

It is also very important to rule out if there is a medical reason for them not eating or taking a restricted diet. Examples could be:

- Do they have a sore throat/ tooth abscess?
- Do they have chewing / swallowing difficulties?

If you are unsure, make an appointment with their G.P.

How to start helping your child broaden their diet

The Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding (sDOR), is an effective tool to help make changes to your child's diet. sDOR encourages you to take leadership with the what, when, and where of feeding and let your child determine how much and whether to eat of what you provide. sDOR applies at every stage in your child's growing-up years, from infancy through the early years through adolescence. sDOR says to feed your baby on demand, letting him determine the timing and tempo of feeding. As they develop and become more regular in his eating patterns, you gradually take on responsibility for when and where to feed. Most children are ready to join in with the meals-plus-snacks routine of family meals by the end of the first year or the beginning of the second year. After that, your job is to maintain the structure of family meals and sit-down snacks throughout your child's growing-up years. When you do your jobs with feeding, your child will do his with eating.

Division of Responsibility



Parent is responsible for:

- what to feed
- when to feed
- where to feed

Child is responsible for:

- how much they eat
- whether they eat from what is offered

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Your jobs with feeding are to . . .

- Choose and prepare the food.
- Provide regular meals and snacks.
- Make eating times pleasant.
- Be considerate of your child's lack of food experience without catering to likes and dislikes.
- Not let your child have food or beverages (except for water) between meal and snack times.
- Let your child grow into the body that is right for them

Part of your feeding job is to trust your child to...

- Eat the amount they need
- Learn to eat the food you eat.
- Grow predictably in the way that is right for him.
- Learn to behave well at mealtime.

How to put this into practise

Investigation

The first step is to carry out some detective work to find out what, when, where and how your child will and won't eat certain foods. Be aware of sensory issues such as textures, heat, cold, smell and colour. You can usually see what kinds of foods, textures etc. your child likes/dislikes.

When texture is a known issue, try to introduce new foods in a similar way at first. For example, a new vegetable can be turned into a puree if chunky textures aren't liked, or traditionally hot food can be served at room temperature.

Introduction and Exposure

When developing a plan for increasing the number and variety of foods your child will eat, it is important to be calm and not controlling. The most successful experiences are when children are given some control, or at least they think that they have some control. Struggles and battles overeating can often make matters worse.

Gradual exposure to new foods can be very important. Gradually introducing a new food will help your child to become desensitised to the smell, look and possibly feel of an unfamiliar food. If a new food is chosen that has the sensory qualities (consistency, texture) that your child likes, you will have a better chance at success e.g. if your child will eat chicken nuggets, try them with baked chicken or if they will only eat a certain brand of pizza, try a different brand. Start with a food that has a good 'sensory fit'. Offer the food on a daily basis by putting it where your child will be able to desensitise to it.

Think of how your child might best accept a new item in their space. Frequently a small separate bowl or plate put close to their seat will work. Try to increase your child's exposure to new foods by starting with:

1. Put the new food on the table
2. Put the new food on their plate
3. Encourage them touch it
4. Encourage them to lick the food
5. Encourage them to hold the food in their mouth
6. Encourage them to swallow the food

Sometimes a child can tolerate the new item on their plate as long as they understand that the only expectation is that it will just stay on their plate. Repeatedly try offering the identical food item once or twice a day, at meals, with no expectations attached. Sometimes this technique, as well as other family members (particularly brothers and sisters) showing their enjoyment of eating this new item,

can encourage your child to try tasting it. You may wish to try the same food item for two or three weeks.

1. Avoid hiding Foods

Children do not want to be tricked. Tricks such as hiding 'extra' vegetables in spaghetti sauce and or supplements in a child's favourite drink do sometimes work but can also backfire. Sometimes, after finding 'additions' to familiar favourites, children learn to be suspicious of all foods and will limit their diet even further. This strategy probably works best when the sensory characteristic the child is focusing on is the 'look' of the food. If a child is more sensitive to the smell, taste or texture of a food, it may be harder to make 'additions' because they are usually easier for the child to detect. Be cautious when using this strategy. Do let your child try sauces with their food, if this helps them to accept and tolerate new foods.

2. Keep calm

Eating and feeding problems can sometimes dominate family life. It is easy to be overwhelmed when eating problems are severe and are so closely tied to your child's health and development. Try not to become stressed or angry in front of the child as this can be discouraging. If they refuse to eat a food do not react and try to keep calm.

3. Be patient

The expectation to sit and eat at the table can be structured in small steps and graded so your child is successful. Don't expect miracles after 10 minutes, an hour, or even a week. Patience and consistency with this process is key to success, however this isn't always easy, especially when you've had a long tiring day!

4. Desensitisation

This can work well with introducing new foods. Its gradual introduction can help your child to become desensitised to the smell, look and texture of an unfamiliar food. First, try a food that has the best chance of suiting your child's tastes as previously detailed. It might just sit on a plate near theirs for several nights. For the next few meals, it could be placed on their plate but with no pressure for them to eat it. Next, family members can try the new food and show their enjoyment. With a gradual introduction, and no negative effects this may allow your child to eventually try the new food.

5. Explore the sense

For children who refuse to put food in their mouths, encourage them to explore their favourite toys orally (ensure first there are no small parts that could come off and be swallowed). Dip their toys into flavoured water, pureed foods etc. Encourage them to become more comfortable having their hands, toys and food near and around their mouths.

6. Involvement with Meal Preparation

Encourage your child to help you with meal preparation. Children are more likely to taste something if they help make it. They could go to the shops with you, then select and buy ingredients, if they are comfortable with this. If you have a garden, let your child help you grow fruit, vegetables, and herbs.

If cooking a recipe together give them a sense of control: let your child choose between chicken or fish, beans or peas, potato or rice. Try to stick to two choices, any more and your child can become overwhelmed. If age appropriate, let them help with cooking, mixing, chopping. Let your child put the meat etc in the pan and help you to arrange food on each plate so it looks nice. If they have a chance to help prepare food they are more likely to touch and smell it.

7. A Positive Attitude

This is important for parents who are introducing new foods. The focus should be on patience and to let your child feel in control of what will and won't be eaten. Undue pressure and arguments usually only make children more resistant to new foods than ever and it's a battle you are unlikely to win, as it is one area that your child can control.

8. Structure

Have set times for meals, and sit down as a family to enjoy a meal together. Don't ever pressure your child to eat new / different foods – let them decide when they want to eat it.

It is very important to let your child get hungry, in order to motivate them to eat. Stick to 5 opportunities to eat within a 24 hour period e.g. 3 meal times and 2 snack times. You want to discourage 'grazing' and encourage routine.

Meals should last no longer than around 20-30 minutes, after this time food remove should be removed.

9. Expectations

Let your child play with their food. Outline what behaviours are unacceptable, such as throwing the whole plate of food on the floor, but what they can do is, feel the texture of his food with their fingers. This process helps your child explore the food with their tactile/touch sense before they use their sense of taste.

10. Presentation

Be creative. A so-called 'picky eater' may be more willing to eat "rocks and trees" than meatballs and broccoli. Fun arrangements such as some vegetable sticks and grapes / tomatoes placed in a smiley face pattern on a plate may encourage your child to taste something new. Let them play with their food as much as possible.