

Fact Sheet



ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO TRY NEW FOODS AND MANAGING FUSSY EATERS

Feeding young children can be challenging as they often have small appetites and very definite likes and dislikes.

As a parent, it can be concerning and frustrating when your child refuses to try new foods or to eat what you have provided.

Tips to encourage new foods and manage fussy eating

Setting the scene

- A predictable routine for meal and snack times helps your child to know when to expect food. This can help children develop good eating habits.
- Avoid letting your child graze throughout the day, as this makes it harder for them to become a better eater.
- Eat together as a family wherever possible. Try to keep meal times relaxed and calm.
- Remove distractions such as toys, games and television during meal and snack times so your child can focus on the task of eating.
- Offer all children the same family foods and try to avoid preparing separate meals for different family members.
- Set a good example by eating and enjoying a range of healthy foods yourself. Children learn to be good eaters by watching how other people eat and the foods they choose.

Sparking your child's interest in trying new foods

- Offer your child a new food regularly. Children may need to try a new food many times before liking or accepting it. Don't give up or say "they don't like it" after just a few tries.
- Encourage your child to explore new foods. Looking, touching and smelling a new food helps children learn about it and be more prepared to taste it. Talk about the food with your child.

- Involve your child in choosing new foods when you are shopping.
- Children love to help with food preparation tasks such as pouring, stirring, spreading, dipping and shaking. Children who are actively involved in preparing food are more likely to try that food.
- Growing vegetables and fruit is a fun way to help children learn where food comes from. Try growing cherry tomatoes, herbs, beans or strawberry plants in pots or in the garden.
- Serve only a small amount of the new food on their plate so it doesn't overwhelm your child. Serve alongside foods they already like eating and are familiar with.
- Make meals and snacks look appealing by using different coloured foods, interesting shapes and textures.
- Try varying the way new foods are prepared. Some children prefer cold, crunchy foods while others enjoy cooked. This can change over time.
- Give your child a choice of healthy food – offer a small range of healthy foods eg in the middle of the table, and allow your child to choose what s/he wants to eat.
- Congratulate your child when s/he tries something new even if it's just a small mouthful. Their efforts to learn about food by touching, smelling or tasting it are also important to acknowledge.



For more information and ideas on healthy eating and physical activity go to www.healthykids.nsw.gov.au



Health



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Don't force the issue

- Meal times shouldn't feel like a battleground. Your child will associate eating with feeling stressed and upset if mealtimes are always a battle. This only makes the situation worse and can have lasting effects.
- It's best not to push your child to eat if s/he is not hungry or say they've had enough.
- Don't insist that your child eats everything on their plate. Children need to learn to respond to their body's natural signals of fullness and hunger in order to develop healthy eating habits and be able to control their food intake. It is preferable to serve a smaller amount and allow your child to ask for more if they are still hungry.
- Try not to use food as a bribe. For example, don't say 'No ice-cream unless you eat your broccoli.' This just makes the ice-cream more desirable and the broccoli even less desirable! Try not to reward good behaviour with food treats.

What if my child refuses to eat?

- Keep calm and don't make a fuss if your child is refusing foods. Unless ill, children won't voluntarily starve themselves. If your child is healthy and energetic, s/he is eating enough.
- Set some ground rules and make sure your child knows what will happen if s/he doesn't eat the meal or snack provided. Children feel more secure when they know what to expect. One approach is to allow a certain time for snacks (10 – 20 minutes) and meal times (20 – 30 minutes). If the food is not eaten within this time period, allow your child to leave the table. Safely store the uneaten food covered and in the refrigerator. If they come back soon after

and declare they are still hungry, offer it one more time. If it's not wanted, then it will not hurt them to wait until the next meal or snack time.

- Don't be tempted to think that "something is better than nothing". If the meal is refused or you don't think they've eaten enough, don't offer extra milk, toast or 'sometimes' foods such as lollies, fruit juice, packet snacks or biscuits. Your child will quickly learn to refuse the healthy meals and snacks knowing s/he will be rewarded later on with foods s/he prefers. You will be left feeling upset that another meal or snack has gone untouched. Your child can wait until the next meal or snack time and then offer healthy food again. Remind yourself that you are teaching them how to be a better eater by doing this.
- Think about your child's food intake over the week rather than worrying about whether they've eaten enough at this meal or on this day. If you feel that overall, s/he is eating food from all of the food groups, then it is likely they are getting the nutrients needed. When the majority of foods offered to a child are healthy everyday foods, then their diet will be well balanced.
- If you are still concerned that your child is not eating enough, check how they are growing using the growth charts in your baby's Blue Book. Your doctor, Child and Family Health Nurse or Accredited Practising Dietitian can help you interpret the charts to see how your child is progressing.

