

ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO TRY NEW FOODS AND MANAGING FUSSY EATERS

Feeding young children can be a challenging experience. Preschool-aged children 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 prevent (or minimise) fussy eating

Setting the scene

- Consistent meal and snack times helps to ensure your child knows when to expect food and can help your child develop good eating habits.
- Eat together as a family and try to keep meal times relaxed and calm.
- It's best to avoid distractions such as toys, games and television during meal and snack times.
- Offer your children the same foods as the family eats, and try to avoid preparing separate meals for family members wherever possible.
- Set a good example by eating and enjoying a range of healthy foods yourself.



Sparking your child's interest in trying new foods

- Offer your child a new food regularly. A child may need to try a new food many times before liking or accepting it. Don't give up and put a food on your child's 'dislike list' after just a few tries.
- Encourage your child to explore new foods. Invite looking, touching and smelling of a new food before tasting it. Talk about the food with your child.
- Involve your child in choosing new foods to purchase.
- 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.
- Start with only a small amount of the new food on the plate so that it doesn't overwhelm your child.
- 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 on the plate 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 – give cuddles, smiles and lots of praise!

Tips to encourage new foods and prevent (or minimise) fussy eating (continued)

Don't force the issue

- Meal times shouldn't feel like a battle ground. Your child will associate stressful feelings with eating and this will make the situation worse and can have lasting effects.
- It's best not to force your child to eat if s/he is not hungry.
- Likewise, don't insist that your child eats everything on the 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.
- Try not to use foods as bribes. For example, don't say 'No ice-cream unless you eat your broccoli.' This just makes the ice-cream more desirable and the broccoli less desirable!



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. Store the uneaten food safely (eg covered and refrigerated) and offer it one more time later on that same day when your child is feeling hungry.
- Try not to substitute uneaten healthy meals and snacks with 'sometimes' foods such as lollies, soft drink, fruit juice, crisps or biscuits. Your child will quickly learn to refuse the healthy meals and snacks knowing s/he will be rewarded later on with snack foods s/he prefers. Wait until the next scheduled snack or meal time before offering healthy food again.
- Think about your child's food intake over the week rather than daily to see if s/he is eating food from all of the food groups and therefore getting the nutrients s/he needs. Children rarely eat a balanced diet each day, but do over a week if the majority of foods offered are healthy everyday foods.
- If you are still concerned that your child is not eating enough, check the growth charts in your baby's Blue Book. Alternatively, speak with your doctor, Child and Family Health Nurse or Accredited Practising Dietitian.

