

How to manage fussy eating in young children.



“Get here and eat your greens!”

Many children will be fussy eaters at one time or another. Often, it can simply be a matter of time, and things can become better on their own. This leaflet aims to help you.

Praise and encourage your child as they go along

Giving children attention for the ‘right’ behaviour is a way of teaching them to do that behaviour more. You might give your attention by telling them specifically what they’ve done that you’re happy with, e.g. “I’m really pleased with the way you’re sitting at the table today”. The key is to be specific and to do it immediately after your child has done it. It is also important to try to inject some positive feeling into it – a smile or a hug emphasises that you really mean it.

Try not to get into a battle over food

An effective technique to combine with praise is to ignore the irritating mealtime behaviours that you want to see less of (i.e. ignore the times when your child is not eating). The same attention principle applies: if children don’t get adult attention when they do something, they tend to do it less. Although it can be difficult to ignore irritating or provocative behaviours, it’s really worth trying. It can also give you a break from exhausting to-and-fro battles at mealtimes. To make it easier to ignore, try to get on with normal routines. Some have a sentence to say to themselves in their head (e.g., “I know my child will eat when they’re hungry – this meal isn’t the end of the world”).

Give small portions

Children may feel overwhelmed by the amount of food on their plate. You can always offer them more food after.

Use a Star Chart

Some parents find it useful to use a star or sticker chart. Start small (e.g. a sticker for trying, then a sticker for each mouthful, then increase to eating quarter/half the meal) After a certain number of stars a reward can be given, such as a non-food treat or a story. Over time the number of stars for good eating can be extended (e.g. 6 stars = a reward, 12 stars = a reward, etc.) until stars are no longer necessary. Let your child know exactly what they need to do to earn a star (e.g. eat two forkfuls). Choose one behaviour to focus on at a time, and then move on to the next one.

Keep mealtimes regular and short

End mealtimes after 20 or 30 minutes, no matter what your child has eaten – use a phone, if that helps. Having a limited time for meals makes it easier for you to praise and ignore consistently over this shorter period. This will also teach your child that they really do need to eat within that time. Have regular mealtimes where you can eat together. This means less focus on the child. They also have the chance to see you eat well.

Avoid snacks between meals

Avoid snacks even if the child has eaten poorly at the last meal. If your child drinks a lot of milk, it may be helpful to cut this down (if your child is an appropriate age to do so).

Involve your child in preparing food

This gets them used to seeing and handling different foods (e.g. putting toppings on a pizza or helping to mix a sauce).

Limit distractions

It can be very hard to focus on eating if more tempting things are happening nearby (e.g. TV, computer games, iPad etc). Remove these distractions by turning them off or keeping them out of reach.

Keep trying!

It tends to take at least 10-12 tastes of a new food before we can learn to like it (or not!). **Be patient** and give your child the chance to learn whether they like a food or not over time. If your child still won't eat it after this time, then leave it. Try it again at a later stage. Remember that when children say "I don't like it" what they often mean is "I don't feel like it".

If you would like further help in managing fussy eating, come and speak to your child's class teacher or the home school liaison manager.

When to see the Doctor

Try not to worry even if your child's diet does seem very limited. Research shows that most toddlers/children almost always manage to eat the right balance of nutrients needed for healthy growth and development. However, if your child is losing weight, seems lethargic, is weak or irritable or has a fever, then discuss this with your health professional.