

# Fussy feeders – advice for parents of younger children

*Information for parents of children under 5 years of age*

## Guidance and tips for parents - Why children refuse food

Food refusal is a normal phase that most children pass through.

Infants learn to like foods that they are given in the first year of life. They learn to accept different tastes and they learn to cope with different textures. As they move into their second year, however, all children start to show a fear of trying new foods. This fear is a normal part of development.

Fear of new foods in the second year may be a survival mechanism to prevent increasingly mobile children from poisoning themselves through eating anything and everything.

Some children find it very difficult to move through this stage. They are very worried about trying new foods, and may begin to reject many of the foods that they used to accept. These children may also find it difficult getting used to different tastes, smells and food textures. They have an inborn reluctance to move on to taking new foods. They feel safer just eating the few foods that they are used to.

This phase will normally pass without any problems but may be more evident in some children than in others.

Children often need to taste a new food, many times before they can learn to like it, so it is important to always continue to offer the previously rejected food the next time you are eating it as a family.

Young children will generally refuse extra food when they have eaten enough. Your child may eat less food than other children of the same age. If your child is growing and developing normally then they *are* taking the right quantity of food for their own needs.

Remember that the quantity of food that children eat may vary from day-to-day. Some parents get anxious about this and children then tend to react to parental anxiety by reducing intake.

For most children, faddy eating is simply a phase that they eventually pass through. Very occasionally, faddy eating is linked to medical problems or a memory associated with discomfort on eating. Your GP may be able to assess this and can refer your child to a paediatrician or a speech and language therapist for oral-motor dysfunction, if necessary.



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Most extremely faddy eaters but have nothing medically wrong with them. Such children quite often get much worse at around 18 months, although they may have had problems with lumpy foods when these were first introduced.

These children usually dislike getting their hands and face dirty, and are often sensitive to sound, touch or smells. Children generally grow out of this and start to improve their eating at around five years of age.

It is especially important that these children are not forced to eat food that they dislike as this may cause them to vomit and this may eventually affect their growth.

Children may also lose their appetite if they are:

- full from too many drinks, especially if given just before a meal/snack
- tired
- not feeling well
- shouted at
- pressured to eat more food when they have had enough
- pressured to eat food they dislike
- frequently offered foods that they dislike or find disgusting
- continually offered food and drinks throughout the day (grazing)
- rushed at mealtimes
- feeling sad, lonely, anxious or insecure
- constipated
- anaemic (low iron levels)

**Messy play** is a good way to help desensitize your child's hands and encourage them to tolerate different textures. Children need to touch food before they will be willing to put it in their mouth. Try using very positive language such as 'when you do', and 'then you will be able to' rather than saying 'if you don't do' and 'then you won't be able to'.



## How to manage your child's faddy eating

Do	Reason
Give your child <b>up to a maximum</b> of 1 pint of milk (or equivalent) per day. For example, the following are the equivalent of 1 third (1/3) of a pint of milk; one adult sized (or 2 small) yoghurt pots or 1oz (30g) hard cheese.	Milk is very filling and will reduce your child's appetite for solid food. All drinks should be given in an open or non-valved cup. <b>Aim to stop baby bottles around 12 months of age.</b>
Eat with your child as often as possible and have family meals as much as possible.	Children learn by copying their parents and other children.
Develop a daily routine of three meals and two to three snacks around your child's sleeping pattern and be consistent with your management of their eating.	Children don't eat well if they become over hungry or very tired; they also become confused if their eating is managed differently by multiple childcare providers.
Offer two courses at meals: one savoury course followed by a sweet course.	This gives two opportunities for your child to take in the calories and nutrients needed and offers a wider variety of foods. It also makes the meal more interesting.
Encourage your child to eat fortified breakfast cereal at least once every day. This may be at breakfast time or as a snack before bed. Try to choose a cereal which is fortified with 8mg iron per 100g cereal.	Fortified breakfast cereal contains additional vitamins and minerals, often including iron, which will help improve the overall nutritional intake of your child's diet.
Praise children when they eat well.	Children respond positively to praise.
Make positive comments about the food.	Parents and carers are strong role models. If you make positive comments about foods, your child will be more willing to try them.
Arrange for children to eat with other children as often as possible.	Some children eat better when they are with their own age group.



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Do	Reason
Give age appropriate portions (see link to Caroline Walker Trust guidance below). If these are finished, praise your child and offer more.	Children of all ages can be overwhelmed by large portions. For example, do not fill your child's plate completely with meat and potato if they do not eat any vegetables as they will not have any appetite to try new foods.
Offer finger foods as often as possible.	Children enjoy having the control of feeding themselves with finger foods.
Eat in a calm, relaxed environment without distractions such as TV, games and toys.	Children concentrate on one thing at a time. Distractions make it more difficult to concentrate on eating.
Finish the meal within about 20-30 minutes and accept that after this time, your child is not going to eat any more.	Carrying the meal on for too long is unlikely to result in your child eating much more. It is better to wait for the next snack or meal.
Put a 'pea-sized' amount of the new food on your child's plate. Then gently encourage them to touch it or pick it up before (eventually) putting it into their mouth. It may take a few 'exposures' to the new food before your child will touch or pick up or taste the new food. Reward often help. The reward generally needs to be immediate as young children do not understand time very well.	Children are more likely to be able to cope with a tiny amount of a new food rather than being faced with a whole portion. As their confidence grows, you can gradually increase the portion size. Continue to always give lots of praise and positive encouragement.

### Link to Caroline Walker Trust publications

These resources have been produced to provide a simple guide to different meals, snacks and drinks that, on average, provide the amount of energy and other nutrients that infants and children from the first year of life. See the web links below:

**0 – 12 months:** <http://www.cwt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CHEW-1stYearLifePracticalGuide.pdf>

**1 – 4 years:** <http://www.cwt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CHEW-1-4YearsPracticalGuide3rd-Edition.pdf>



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## What to do when your child shows extreme food refusal

If your child is a faddy eater you will be aware of how easily mealtimes can turn into a nightmare of refused food, tantrums and frustration (for everyone).

Learning to eat is like any other learning process - it takes time. As parents there are a number of things you can do to help to ensure that you and your child are able to enjoy food together.

Do	Reason
Give small frequent meals of foods that your child accepts.	Some children become very anxious at mealtimes and are sometimes very slow eaters. Small frequent meals will help them to take in the calories that they need.
Remember, even children who are extremely faddy eaters usually grow and develop normally, if they are given the foods that they will accept.	It is important to keep your child growing well, and these extreme 'food refusers' do grow as we would expect them to if they have enough of the food that they will eat.
Encourage your child to experience different textures through 'messy' play every day. Your child may find some textures (like Playdoh) very difficult, so start with textures that they are happy to touch. This may need to be drier consistencies initially such as puffed rice or pasta. Gradually progress to more messy or wet substances allowing them to gain confidence. Have plenty of fun and get messy. If you don't like touching certain textures yourself, or don't feel comfortable allowing your child to make a mess, then why not take them to a playgroup in your area.	Many children who are extreme food refusers are very sensitive to touch on the hands and mouth, and so will not even pick up new foods. Messy play helps them to get used to new textures.

## How to broaden your child's food experience:

Some children simply haven't had had enough experience with solid textured foods in their first year. They may only eat pureed food or 'easy' bite and dissolve foods like Skips or Quavers. This is because they have not learnt to move food around in their mouth, and they are frightened by food that needs to be chewed. Some children are wary of putting anything with a different texture into their mouth.



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There are a number of things that you can do to broaden your child's experience of food textures.

Do	Reason
For babies or very young children, continue to give the pureed or soft food that your child likes.	This will ensure that your child takes the calories needed for growth.
Then, gradually introduce more 'experiences' of slightly more solid foods. Children only need small amounts of these foods so that they can learn how the food feels in their mouth, and how to move the food around in their mouth.	This will enable your child to learn the chewing skills needed for more solid textured foods.
Start by introducing bite and dissolve foods. As your child begins to accept some bite and dissolve foods, replace one of the spoon-fed pureed meals with bite and dissolve foods.	These are foods that quickly dissolve in your mouth if you hold them there; like Quavers, Skips, Wotsits, meringue, and wafer biscuits.
Gradually increase the firmness of the foods offered as your child becomes more used to them. Remember that your child will still need some soft textured foods, such as yogurts or fromage frais.	This will give your child confidence about having lumps in the mouth; these foods quickly become soft and they are less likely to cause a choke and gag reaction.

You need to balance your child's calorie needs with their need to learn new chewing skills. This is to make sure that your child continues to take enough calories to grow.

Don't	Reason
Give very difficult solid foods at this stage. Avoid foods like meat, bread and uncooked apple.	Your child may not be able to cope with these textures. They may feel that they are choking when they try to swallow these foods, and be fearful of trying more difficult textures in the future.
Worry about dietary balance at this stage.	It is more important at this stage to make sure that your child has enough calories to grow well. Dietary balance can come later.



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If the problem persists see your GP or health visitor who may refer your child to a specialist speech and language therapist for help with the transition to firmer textured food or a community paediatrician who may be able to identify the cause of your child's inability to cope with firmer textured food.

It can be extremely worrying if your child constantly refuses to eat anything but a small number of different foods. At this stage, calorie intake is more important than a varied diet. However, there are a number of ways you can improve your child's diet.

Don't	Reason
Refuse to give high-energy foods, like ice cream, cakes, biscuits and chocolate, in the hope that your child will eat 'proper' meals and 'healthy' foods.	This is not a good way to get your child to eat new foods, and your child might lose weight if you withhold their 'safe' foods.
Try to force your child to eat food.	This will make your child even more anxious at mealtimes, and may cause your child to vomit the food back up.
Leave long gaps between meals to try to make your child hungrier.	This will make your child less hungry over time, and may lead to weight loss.
Hide new foods inside foods that your child already likes. Your child may just stop eating the liked foods.	Some children can very easily detect new tastes and smells, even when hidden in other foods.

Fact sheet adapted with kind permission from the Infant and Toddler Forum.

For further advice on managing your child's fussy eating, please visit the following web page:

<http://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org>

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