

Fussy feeders – advice for parents of older children

Information for parents of children over 5 years of age

Guidance and tips for parents

Food refusal is a normal, although difficult phase, that many children pass through. However for some children it may take months or years, rather than weeks to resolve.

While this phase will normally pass without any problems, it may be more evident in some children than in others. This will also become more evident as your child gets older and refuses to eat a wider variety of food than their friends.

Older children who refuse new foods have generally been fussy toddlers. They tend to have become very familiar with frequently given foods and it may be difficult to encourage them to eat a greater variety of food. They may not like to deviate from their 'safe foods'.

The quantity of food that children eat generally varies from day-to-day. Some parents get anxious about this and children then tend to react to parental anxiety by further reducing their intake.

Older children may be very anxious about trying new foods. They will need to want to change their behaviour in order to try a wider variety of food.

It is important to recognize that children may 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)

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.



FACT SHEET – Paediatric Dietetics

Most extremely faddy eaters have nothing medically wrong with them. Often fussy feeders had problems with lumpy foods when these were first introduced. These children often dislike getting their hands and face dirty, and are often sensitive to sound, touch or smells.

Cooking and baking is a good way to help desensitize your child's hands and encourage them to tolerate different textures. Children need to touch and smell food before they will be willing to put it in their mouth. Try baking bread or scones with your child, encouraging them to put their hands into 'messy or sticky' dough. Always use positive language such as 'isn't this fun' or 'won't this taste yummy'.

How to manage your child's faddy eating

Do	Reason
Give your child up to a maximum 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.
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 or three snacks.	Children don't eat well if they become over hungry or very tired. It also gives your child different opportunities to eat.
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.



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Do	Reason
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 your child to eat with other children as often as possible and encourage school dinners, even if it is only once a week.	Some children eat better when they are with their own age group.
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. 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 food.
Finish the meal within about 20-30 minutes and accept that after this 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.
Learn to recognise the signs that your child has had enough, and remove the uneaten food without comment.	<p>Children are saying they have had enough food when they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● say no ● hold food in their mouth and refuse to swallow it ● spit food out repeatedly ● cry, shout or scream ● gag or retch.
Encourage your child to try a new food by putting 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 or many 'exposures' to the new food before your child will touch or pick up or taste the new food. Rewards often help such as negotiated time on a computer game.	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. Rewards also help.



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Eat in a calm, relaxed environment without distractions such as TV, games and toys.	Children concentrate on one thing at a time. Distractions can make it more difficult to concentrate on eating.
If your child is unable to tolerate the new food on their own plate, try a 'taste plate' on another plate, which sits beside your child's main meal.	This will encourage your child to get used to seeing different foods without too much pressure on eating the new food.
Encourage your child to choose which new food they would like to try and record this in a note book.	Your child will be able to see how much progress they have made and this will encourage and motivate them.

How much food and what types of food should I give my child?

The Caroline Walker Trust have produced the following resources as simple guide to different meals, snacks and drinks that, on average, provide the amount of energy and other nutrients that children require. See the web links below:

<https://www.cwt.org.uk/publications/>

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
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. It is reassuring to know that even extreme 'food refusers' do grow as we would expect them to if they have enough of the food that they will eat.
Where possible, 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.



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Do	Reason
Encourage your child to experience different textures through 'messy play', baking and cooking most days. Your child may find some textures (like dough) very difficult, so start with textures that they are happy to touch. This may need to drier consistencies initially such as puffed rice or pasta. Gradually progress to more messy or wet substances, allowing them to gain confidence.	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 in a non-threatening environment.

Some children feel safer just eating the same, few foods that they are used to (safe foods).

It can be extremely worrying if your child constantly refuses to eat anything but a small number of different foods. Calorie intake is just as important as a varied diet.

There are a number of ways you can improve your child's diet:

Don't	Reason
Don't 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 all their 'safe' foods.
Don't 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.
Don't 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.
Don't 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

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