

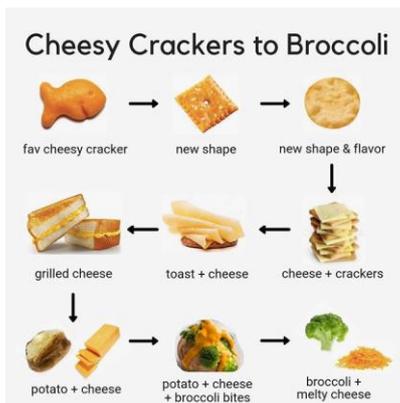
Food Chaining

A way to expand the diet of your child

Food Chaining is a way of taking a food which is liked and accepted by your child and slowly adding subtle variations to this food to allow your child to make the bridge to new foods. The idea behind food chaining is that you start with a food your child already likes and accepts and look for links between this food and the new food you are going to offer.

These steps need to be small and the pace of the food chain needs to be dictated by the child. There is no hiding of food, switching packets or force feeding your child, all food chains happen with your child's knowledge and consent. For example, if McDonald's French fries are accepted and nothing else a food chain might look a little like this:

- McDonald's French fries
- French fries from other fast food restaurants (Burger King, KFC)
- French Fries cooked at home from a packet (McCain's, Supermarket own brand, etc)
- Homemade French fries
- Different shaped French fries (potato smiles, alphabet shapes, potato waffles)
- Fried slices of potato
- Roast potato
- Mashed potato



A food chain is not a linear thing. At any point you can branch off and start a new chain toward a new food. Different shaped French fries might lead on to potato skins and from here the addition of different toppings – maybe even a meat or vegetable. Another example would be to go from French fries to sweet potato fries and then on to sweet potato. In time this process has some serious potential to increase the number of foods your child will eat!

Food chaining is **not force feeding**. The child leads, the team guides. If a child makes a bold leap from homemade fries to broccoli, our role is to encourage, support and get busy working on a whole new chain. If he doesn't want to move past French fries, we focus on another chain, maybe the one that starts with another preferred food such as pancakes or apple. **There is never to be any pressure to eat anything and preferred foods should always be offered alongside new foods which are being tried.**

If your child is really struggling to make the transition from one food to another look at the size of the step you are asking them to make. If it is too big see if you can make some smaller links. You may be able to start with changing the way you present the child's preferred food as a way of getting them used to small changes. For example you could:

- Cut their sandwiches into different shapes- squares, soldiers, triangles, cookie cutters.
- Present their food on a different plate, sit them at a different place at the table, encourage them to pour their packet of crisps into a bowl or eat their yoghurt tube with a spoon.
- Put a sticker on their favourite cup they use to drink from
- Change the temperature of the food- can you eat the yoghurt tube as an ice lolly or heat up the milk on their breakfast cereal?

Points to remember when food chaining

- Keep the steps small and try and link the new food to the existing accepted food as much as possible.
- Offer the new food alongside the existing food. Your child may start by having one McDonald's chip followed by one 'new' chip and then go back to McDonalds chips for the rest of the meal. Gradually increase the amount of the new food the child is offered and is eating.
- Once the child is regularly eating a reasonable amount of this new food, **it must become a regular part of their diet** alongside the other foods. Continue to offer the old foods and the new foods regularly to ensure they remain in your child's diet.
- Use visual supports to show your child all the foods they like and have tried. If you can, included pictures of your child eating and enjoying the foods. This can be useful for the days when your child refuses a preferred food.
- If your child refuses a food, try not to comment and make a fuss. Simply offer the food again another day and keep offering other preferred foods on rotation as well.
- It may take children 10-20 exposures of a new food to accept it into their diet. Keep going and try and keep mealtimes relaxed and stress free. Your job as a parent is to offer foods (both accepted foods and new foods) and it is your child's job to decide what they eat and how much.

Food chaining is a way of rapidly increasing the number of foods your child eats but it does take time and patience. If you are worried that your child is losing weight, refusing more foods or becoming more distressed at mealtimes please contact your child's therapist.