

Managing fussy eaters

Children's nutrition doesn't have to be frustrating. Consider these strategies to avoid power struggles and help the picky eater in your family eat a balanced diet. Ask your GP, Naturopath, Nutritionist, or health care provider if you feel the fussiness is of deeper concern, related to anxiety, digestive insufficiency, or nutrient depletion.

1. **Aim to eat main meals together.** Sit down as a family, make mealtimes as relaxed and enjoyable as possible, and **set a good example** by eating a variety of healthy foods, as you would hope for your child.
2. **Minimize distractions.** Turn off the television and other electronic gadgets during meals. This will help your child focus on eating. Keep in mind that television advertising might also encourage your child to desire sugary foods.
3. **Recruit your child's help.** At the market ask your child to help you select fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. At home, encourage your child to help you rinse veggies, stir things, set the table, or even to pick some herbs from the garden!
4. **Involve the child in how food is grown & prepared.** Encourage each child to choose a new fruit or vegetable each week to include in the weekly meal. You can keep a poster on the wall of a rainbow and give them a sticker to place on the color, each time they try a different colored fruit or vegetable – some children love the motivation.
5. **Meet hunger when it's there and respect your child's appetite - or lack of.** If your child isn't hungry, don't force a meal or snack. Likewise, don't bribe or force your child to eat certain foods or clean his or her plate. This might only ignite — or reinforce — a power struggle over food. In addition, your child might come to associate mealtime with anxiety and frustration. Serve small portions to avoid overwhelming your child and give him or her the opportunity to independently ask for more.
6. **Be patient with new foods.** Children are often wary of trying new foods: “food-neophobia”! Your child might need repeated exposure to a new food before he or she takes the first bite. Encourage your child by talking about a food's color, shape, aroma and texture — not whether it tastes good. Talk about how this new food supports their growth, strength, energy, and health. Try serving new foods along with your child's favorite foods.
7. **Encourage your child to stay at the table for the designated mealtime — even if he or she doesn't eat.** Keep serving your child healthy choices until they become familiar and preferred.
8. **Make it fun and be creative** with how you present food to your child. Serve broccoli and other veggies with a favorite dip or sauce. Cut foods into various shapes with cookie cutters. Add baby spinach to smoothies. Add parsley, zucchini & green peas to spaghetti sauce, top cereal with fruit slices, or mix grated zucchini and carrots into casseroles and soups.
9. **Praise children for trying new things,** and reward with non-food items if the child is doing well.

If you're concerned that picky eating is compromising your child's growth and development, consult your child's primary health care provider. In addition, consider recording the types and amounts of food your child eats for three days. The big picture might help ease your worries. The food diary can also assist your primary health care provider to determine any problems. In the meantime, remember that your child's eating habits won't likely change overnight — but the small steps you take each day can help promote a lifetime of healthy eating.

NOTE

Some ways to broaden children's diets - the premise is to create healthy food messages, keep foods that you want them to eat like vegetables in eyesight on the table where you eat as a family e.g. bowls of cut up vegetables or fruits for desert, salads, side dishes during meals. Praise your child for trying, try not to give too much attention to negative behavior like saying 'yuck' and food throwing while reinforcing general age appropriate table manners.

Remember children need to see something, touch something, taste something multiple times before they may eat it. So, to eat something can be a big achievement for a fussy child so try to honor that without going overboard.

In addition, one day a child could want to try the vegetable you have been talking about together, but if it's not there they will not get the opportunity. This is why it can be valuable to eat as a family even 1-2 x a week to create these healthy visual messages for our children and expose them to these desired foods.

Get them involved with shopping for food – “can you fill up this bag with mandarins for me” , take them to the farmers market where they can try out samples of fruits or vegetables, allow them to prepare foods e.g. cut up vegetables with on a chopping board with a blunt knife like soft mushrooms. Smaller children could have a play kitchen, or old pots and pans and wooden fruit or food items to play with.

Growing some fruit or vegetables or herbs in the garden or small pot can be a lovely way to introduce fresh foods too. The idea is that we expose our children to growing things so they see where things come from (they also get incidental exposure the beneficial microbes) and they may naturally want to taste them. This can open their palate and give them the opportunity to try new things and get excited about different flavors. Think about exposing them to all the different tastes e.g. Sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, umami. You could create a game around this.

Finally, a note on hiding foods... you can do this and it may be a good idea to include more veg in the diet by adding it to things like soups or Bolognese to increase the nutrition. But crucially we want our

children to know what they are eating and desire to choose and eat a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. If you always hide them, how will they know they are eating them ?

One thing some parents like to do is make gummies – a natural gelatin gummy for kids they can be a nice way to get more veg/fruit and protein into our children while supporting their gut health and protein absorption. Please ask for some recipes!

“It is up you where and what you child eats...it is up to your child how much and whether.”



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