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Helping your child
accept new foods into
their diet

Royal Berkshire Hospital
Joint Feeding Clinic

This leaflet aims to encourage parents and carers to try tips and techniques to help their children overcome eating problems.

Why do some children become extremely fussy or restrictive eaters?

Fussy eating is a normal developmental stage that often occurs around age 18 months to 2 years when toddlers become wary of new foods and may even reject foods they previously ate. This phase is usually temporary and may be a protective mechanism from our evolutionary past that deters toddlers from eating potentially harmful substances.

However, some toddlers and children exhibit extreme anxiety, when presented with unfamiliar foods and can have very rigid preferences for food texture or appearance and eat only a few foods. This can affect the child's ability to meet their nutritional requirements for healthy growth and development.

Health problems such as prematurity, developmental delay, gastro-oesophageal reflux or the requirement for tube feeding in early life, can impact on the development of key feeding skills. The period between 6 months and 1 year is when infants learn to be able to chew and move food around their mouths before swallowing, so delays or interruptions to the weaning process can hold back these skills and result in an aversion to oral feeding or gagging and retching on lumps. Restricted eating can also develop in older children for a variety of reasons. It is significantly more likely to affect children who are on the autistic spectrum due to sensory issues that influence how foods are perceived.

Further information

Further advice and information in feeding infants and young children and overcoming food refusal can be found on line via :

- Healthy Start : www.healthystart.nhs.uk
- The Infant and Toddler Forum : www.infantandtoddlerforum.org
- The British Dietetic Association Food Fact Sheets : www.bda.com/foodfacts/index/html
- NHS Choices – Fussy Eaters : www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/fussy-eaters.aspx



Other tips that may help...

- Keep to a regular mealtime routine and always offer your child something you know they will be happy to eat, alongside anything new. Avoid introducing new foods at times when your child is very tired or very hungry as this can result in frustration and distress.
- Avoid hiding new or unfamiliar foods within a child's accepted food – unpleasant surprises may cause the child to become even more suspicious of foods and stop eating a food they were previously happy with.
- Clear away uneaten foods without fuss or comment – but give praise for good mealtime behavior instead.
- If your child has a small appetite, offer only small portions so that they can experience the success of finishing the serving. Second helpings can then be offered and portion sizes increased gradually over time. Discuss with your dietitian whether extra snacks between meals would be helpful.
- Never force or coerce your child to eat and avoid resorting to bribery. A reward system that incentivizes *trying* rather than *eating* can be helpful – you can discuss this with your psychologist.
- Try to eat with your child whenever possible – and also arrange for them to eat socially with other children.



Overcoming restrictive eating – what can help?

Remember the 3 Ps:

Be PATIENT
Be POSITIVE
Be PERSISTENT

No two children are the same so no single approach works for every child. However, in nearly all cases it pays to:

Be PATIENT – if restricted eating has become an entrenched behaviour it will not be possible to change it overnight and you may need to try several strategies before finding those that work best for you and your child.

Be POSITIVE – if your child senses that you are stressed or unhappy around their eating habits this can reinforce their food related anxieties and turn mealtimes into a battle of wills. Stay calm and try to keep meal times sociable and fun.

Be PERSISTENT – children will often require multiple exposures to a new food, checking it out in stages such as touching, sniffing and licking, before they feel comfortable with taking their first bite. For older children and children with autism the process is likely to take significantly longer.

Getting started...

Building familiarity with new foods

Children can need time to become familiar with the look and feel of new foods, before they are prepared to try them. This especially applies to children with restrictive eating related to oral aversion, disordered sensory processing and autism. The following strategies may help your child to gradually feel more comfortable around new



foods, although you may need to try each technique many times.

Exploring – look at pictures of foods together and make a collage or scrap-book or make a game out of guessing what food is in a bag by feeling it.

Messy play – allow your child to explore moist, sticky, squashy, slimy or lumpy textures in a fun way. Use paints, clay, sand, dough and other food-based materials.

Shopping – involve your child in selecting and handling foods while out shopping. If your child doesn't cope well in the supermarket, keep the trip short and targeted – just to get the ingredients for one particular dish or recipe.

Cooking – ask your child to help you prepare a meal and encourage them to smell or taste the dish along the way. Ask questions such as “does it smell nice?” or “is it too sweet?” but don't expect them to eat the end result just yet.



Taking the first steps...

Working towards trying something new

Choose a food that you would like to try and introduce into your child's diet. It could be something from a group of foods that your child currently does not eat at all (for example vegetables or meats) or a food that you eat often as a family. You may have a greater chance of success by starting with a food that is similar in appearance and taste, to a food your child already eats. For example if your child already eats breaded chicken you could try breaded fish.

The process of trying a new food can be made easier by breaking it down into a series of smaller steps that are easier for your child to achieve. You will only be able to progress through the steps at a pace

your child is comfortable with so don't worry if you have to make multiple attempts at achieving each stage - your child will still make progress at their own pace.

Step 1: Put a tiny amount (teaspoonful or less) of the new food onto your child's plate, ensuring that it does not touch any of their accepted foods. If this upsets your child, try putting the new food in a ramekin or on a side dish.

Step 2: Gently encourage your child to smell the new food on the plate. If you do it first then your child may copy.

Step 3: Encourage your child to pick up the new food with a fork or a spoon. Don't worry if your child is not willing to put it to their mouth at this stage.

Step 4: Encourage your child to touch the new food with their fingers.

Step 5: Then encourage your child to pick up the new food.

Step 6: Encourage your child to bring the new food to their face and then to their lips. If they are comfortable, try asking your child to touch the food to their tongue.

Step 7: Encourage your child to lick the new food and then put it into their mouth. Reassure them that they can take the food out of their mouth and put it back if they want to.

Step 8: Encourage your child to bite, chew and swallow a very small amount of the food. Again, you may need to do it too so that your child can copy you.

Step 9: Keep going and gradually increase the serving size of the new food each time - but to no more than a normal portion size.

Step 10: Start the process all over again with a new food!

