

Trouble with eating

It can be really stressful and sometimes scary having a child who struggles with eating. Being patient, respecting your child's preferences, and being flexible with eating and mealtimes can help reduce your child's worry or fear around eating, and help them develop a more positive relationship with food.

Note: If your child seems to be struggling to swallow, often gags on food or vomits after eating, is losing weight, or has rare and/or painful bowel movements, contact your GP.

Make eating less scary

- If you are anxious or worried about your child's eating, your child may be picking up on this, and learning that eating is something scary, or something they should worry about. Try to keep yourself as calm as possible around food and mealtimes.
- Make refusing food something that's ok to do. Your child may be more open to trying new food, or eating with everyone else, if they are allowed to do it on their own terms.
- Listen to your child's different experiences. Some children find foods like mayonnaise or carrots spicy; others taste some things (often bitter flavours) much more strongly than other people. Keeping a journal or chart of what your child thinks of different foods can be a fun game for your child, as well as a way for you to keep track of their preferences.

Be flexible around eating routines

- If your child is struggling with eating at mealtimes, try letting them graze or snack throughout the day. Leave a bowl or plate with a selection of foods near your child while they're playing; or have a special shelf your child can reach easily, keep a few different foods on their shelf, and let them go and grab food whenever they want to.
- Some children take a long time to switch tasks, especially if they're switching from something they're enjoying, like playing, to something that worries or scares them, like eating. Letting your child eat while playing, or watching TV, or whatever they're enjoying doing, can help reduce their worry and fear around eating.
- Let your child have distractions while eating. This could be a favourite toy or comfort item; a fidget toy or something else to play with between bites; or a TV show or video to watch. If your child is particularly sensitive to sensory input, eating can be an overwhelming and pretty gross experience, and distractions can help.
- If your child wants a particular food, let them have it (within reason – chocolate for every meal is probably not a great idea, but if your child wants breakfast cereal for dinner, or vegetables for breakfast, don't let ideas about what foods are for what meals get in the way of your child eating).

Introduce new foods slowly

- Jumping straight to eating a new food can be really tough for some children. This is an example of a staged approach to introducing a new food (each step should be repeated the following day if the child couldn't do it, so that it may take up to 2 weeks to get to actually eating the new food):
 - Day 1: Look at the food. Point out the new food in a positive, upbeat tone, and stop there. If your child does want to do more than look at the food at this point, let them, but don't expect anything more than looking at it.
 - Day 2: Smell the food. Hold the food in front of your child and let them sniff it. For children who find strong sensory input particularly difficult, getting used to the smell before they're expected to put something in their mouth can help.
 - Day 3: Touch the food. This lets the child get used to the texture before they have to put the new texture in their mouth. They may drop the food immediately, throw it away, or crush it – all of these, and any other reaction your child has, are an important part of the process of learning about a new food.
 - Day 4: Lick the food.
 - Day 5: Take a bite and spit it out. This stage is important because it lets the child experience having the new food in their mouth without any pressure to keep it there, chew it, or swallow it. Your child may want to stay with the food in their mouth for a while, or spit it out immediately, or somewhere in between. If they do spit it out immediately, you may want to repeat this step on day 6.
 - Day 6: Take a bite, chew the food, and spit it out. Your child may or may not need this step – some children will be ready at this point to swallow the new food; some will want more time to get used to it.
 - Day 7: Take a bite, chew the food, and swallow it.

- At each stage, praise your child for giving it a go, even if they haven't managed it. If they can't manage a particular step two days in a row, take that food off the menu for a while – it's more important to make your child comfortable with eating than it is for them to eat any specific food.
- Always let your child know that a new food is coming, even if it's only very minorly different. For example, if you get a different brand of chicken nuggets, show your child the new packaging, explain that they're still chicken nuggets but they might be a bit different, and if needed, introduce the new brand as if it's an entirely new food.

Find foods that work for your child

- Figure out what kinds of food your child likes and doesn't like. For some children, this is based less on taste and more on things like texture, or whether a food is predictably the same or not (crackers are always the same, for example, while grapes can have huge variation in taste and texture).
- If your child struggles with motor skills, they may be finding it difficult to bite or chew some foods. Providing foods that don't need to be bitten, or that are less chewy, can be helpful.
- Some foods to try:
 - Yoghurt, mashed or pureed fruit or vegetables, smooth peanut butter, and soup with no lumps in are all a consistent texture, and don't need to be bitten or chewed.
 - Veggie chips, celery, carrot sticks, toast, and dried fruits have consistent textures, and don't have strong flavours. Crunching can also be a fun sensory experience for some children.
 - Fish fingers and chicken nuggets can help children get used to having two different textures in the same food.

This resource was written by an autistic author (2024).