

Fussy Eaters

Helping children at mealtimes

1 The Issue

Mealtimes can be highly frustrating when your child refuses to eat your food, or eats only certain foods. Children can be picky eaters, and while it's frustrating, most paediatricians will tell you that as long as a child's growth pattern is appropriate, don't worry. A child's appetite fluctuates daily during the growing years, as do their calorie needs.

A child's growth typically comes in spurts, and energy requirements vary widely among children.

In general, if your child is growing well, and not losing weight or getting fat, then he/she is probably eating enough volume.

2 How to Respond

- **Limit snacks**

If your child is a fussy eater don't be tempted to give them snacks before mealtimes. It's easy to think the snacks can compensate for their lack of eating at mealtimes. Even if the snacks are healthy, they are filling your child up so they are less likely to be hungry at meal times. If you want your child to eat at meal times, cut back or eliminate snacks.

- **Reduce fluid intake immediately before meals**

Fluids take away our craving for food. So try to keep that little tummy empty right before meal times. Resist giving your child a drink 15 minutes before a meal.

- **In general, try to offer a variety of foods at meal times**

Some children get bored with eating the same meals every week. A bit of variety can work wonders.

- **Teach your child about nutrition**

Explain to them how the body needs certain foods and where they are found, and what they do for us.

- **Involve your child in meal planning and shopping**

If children feel like they are part of things, they are more likely to get involved.

- **Let your child help prepare a meal**

Younger children can stir, cut, decorate, make a salad, and set the table. It's amazing what children can do, so put your child to work. Preparation builds appetite and teaches responsibility too.

- **Try disguising food**

For example, if your child doesn't like bananas, whip them up in a milkshake.

- **Eat with your child**

By setting a good example and making meals a family time where you share daily experiences, children are more likely to eat better. Your child likes being with you - that's how they get their belongingness needs met. So make meal times, family times. Your child will look forward to them.

- **Encourage tasting new things**

The 'no-thank-you rule' is a great way to get children to taste new food. Instruct your child to take one bite of each item on their plate before getting a second helping of anything. If they don't like something they like saying 'no-thank-you' to the second bite.

- **Don't offer too much at one time**

Sometimes a child is overwhelmed by plates that are heaped with a lot of food.



- **Use games with small children**

For example, draw a happy face on a sheet of paper. Each time your child takes a bite of food, have her add a ray to make the sun shine. Or take out a bag of blocks. For each bite eaten, your child gets one block to add to a tower or castle.

- **Start meal time traditions**

Meal times are wonderful opportunities to create happy family memories. Try making one night a week special. In my home we make Friday night special. We have special food, put a candle on the table. After the meal we play games, or do activities that are fun. Today my sons are 21 and 18! And we still do it, only now they bring their friends home to enjoy the fun Friday night meal.

3 Final Thoughts

- ◆ **Do not make separate meals**

Don't become a 'fast food' cook for your child. That is, you constantly have to prepare a different meal for your child. If they say they want an egg, you cook an egg, even though the rest of the family are having something different. It's unlikely to help out the situation anyway.

- ◆ **Don't comment if your child does not eat**

Avoid constantly telling your child to eat. The more attention you put on eating their food, the more meal times become a battleground over food.

- ◆ **Use plenty of praise**

If your child only takes a few bites, praise him/her for doing so, and try and stay away from negative comments.

- ◆ **Finally, If your child refuses to eat, make her remain at the table until everyone else has finished.**

It's a natural tendency when you have been at work all day, to come home rushed. There is so much to do at home and so little time! But rushed meals are a red light to a child that has been separated from you all day. If they feel you are not giving them the attention they need, they will use meal times to cause disruptions so they get your attention! They figure, better bad attention than no attention. Having pleasant, relaxed meal times lessens the need for misbehaviour at meal times.