

Picky eating: how to help your child eat better

Creating healthy food habits at a young age can dramatically reduce your child's risk of obesity and of developing the health problems that come with it. Obesity has been referred to as one of the most serious global public health challenges for the 21st century ^[1] and almost 20% of children are obese when they leave school at age 11. [2] The obesity crisis drove trailblazers like Jamie Oliver and the restaurateurs behind the School Food Plan to tackle unhealthy eating in schools. Research has also shown that a healthy diet helps your child to perform better at school.

All well and good for children who are more adventurous eaters and are happy to try a wide variety of foods; but what if your child is fussier and would prefer to live off chips and chocolate? As a parent, you play a key role in your child's eating habits and can help play down their pickiness and encourage them to make healthy food choices.

What's the science behind fussy eating?

It's natural to worry about your child's picky eating, but it's very natural for children to go through phases about food.

It's thought that young children's aversion to new food is an evolutionary development that came about to stop them from picking at potentially poisonous food as they explored their environment. It's also been said that some children's fussiness could be due to weaning too late. Research has shown that you should try to introduce the lumpier textures associated with solid food at six months at the latest.

Will children always be picky about some foods?

Many parents feel their child will never like certain foods – but this isn't true. In fact, after 10-15 tries of anything, a child will like it. And it often takes fewer attempts than that.

What can you do to make your child more adventurous with food?

Create a positive atmosphere at dinner time...

- **Don't reward or punish them with food-based incentives.** Bribing them with treats will make their main meal seem like a chore they have to get through to get to the good part - their main meal should be exciting. You could try rewarding healthy eating with something unrelated to food.
- **Get creative.** Make their plates of food look appetising, colourful and fun.

- **Surround them with adventurous eaters!** Remember that peer pressure works both ways. Try inviting round their friends who are adventurous eaters. Seeing friends try lots of different things and enjoy eating them will encourage your child to do the same.
- **Involve them in food preparation.** This can help make food fun and remove a sense that food is about 'having to do something' they don't want to.
- **Be positive about food.** Don't make it about what they 'can't eat' because 'it's bad for you' - everything is fine in moderation - emphasise all the things you **can** eat. Positive attitudes to food can also help children avoid developing other eating disorders as they grow older.

Adjust your behaviour...

- **Don't reward fussiness with attention.** When children know they can get attention from you by behaving in a certain way, they will only continue that behaviour as they know it works. Be careful with how you react - don't fret over them when they refuse a certain food. Although it can be challenging, try to not be visibly angry or upset.
- **Watch what you say.** Their eating habits aren't set in stone. Just because they refuse a carrot one week, it doesn't mean they won't wolf it down next week. Saying that your child 'doesn't like peas' will lock them into rejecting that food every time they're offered it, as will calling them as a 'fussy eater'.
- **Share food with them.** Offer your child small bites of food from your plate. Be patient and persevere. Remember, the more times they try something, the closer they are to liking it!
- **Be their role model** - if they hear you saying that you 'hate' certain foods and think they're 'disgusting', they'll pick up on your behaviour and say how much they 'hate' those foods too.
- **Let some things slide.** As long as your child has a largely healthy diet then not wanting to eat one or two things isn't a huge problem.

