



Good mealtime guide

Mealtimes can be difficult and stressful for children and families.

Common problems are:

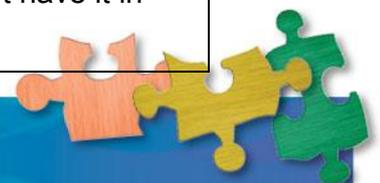
- **my child refuses to eat foods** this can be new foods or foods they have tried before
- **my child only wants to eat their favourite foods** these are often unhealthy or snack foods like yoghurts, crisps and biscuits

Behaviours like these are part of normal development for children. At about 2 years of age children have a 'fear response' to new or different foods. This is called food neophobia. These problems can be mild to severe. They can last for a short or long time. What families do at mealtimes makes a big difference to how children behave and what children will and will not eat

Common unsuccessful strategies

Some strategies do not help children. They may work to start with but then work less and less as time goes on. Some of these less helpful strategies are:

Strategy tried	Things you may say/do	Why this doesn't help
Using food as a reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'if you eat your dinner you can have a biscuit' • 'if you are good at the shops you can have some chocolate' • 'that was a bad fall. Don't be sad, here's some chocolate' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children start to think some foods are nice and some are not nice • children start to want the reward food more • children begin to use food to help them feel better. They start to use food for emotional support • their diet is less healthy. Reward foods tend to be less healthy
Persuading or pressuring your child to eat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • putting food in your child's mouth when they refuse • 'just eat that piece there' • 'if you were good you would eat your dinner. I made it for you' • 'you cannot leave the table until you plate is empty' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children start to be worried about mealtimes and food • children start to have negative feelings about food. They link the food to bad feelings. They start to avoid food • children feel under pressure • they will not want to sit down for meals • children stop learning when they are hungry and when they are full. This can lead to overeating and weight issues
Restricting foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having food in the house that you do not want your child to eat e.g. sweets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this can make children want something that they are not allowed. If you don't want your child to have it, don't have it in the house





Ways to help

Strategies to help at mealtimes

- **exposure:** your child will be more relaxed about food the more times they see it. They need to see the food lots of times. They need to see other people eating and enjoying it. This makes the food less 'scary' and your child more confident.
- **time:** your child needs 15-20 exposures of a food before they are ready to try it. Keep offering foods but do not put pressure on your child to eat it. You can offer foods in different ways which your child may find more exciting. e.g. grated or sticks of cheese.
- **take off the pressure:** avoid coaxing your child to eat. Praise the positive steps they make like tasting something new or sitting nicely at the table.
- **make food fun:** fun food activities away from mealtimes help your child to see it as enjoyable. Singing songs, making pictures, baking and messy food play are all good things to try.
- **model:** children learn by watching other people. If your child prefers to eat snacks or unhealthy foods, try to eat these less as a whole family. If they see you with healthy snacks they will see these as more familiar foods.
- **eat together:** try to have at least one meal a day where you eat as a family or with your child. Mealtimes are more fun with other people than they are on your own.
- **make your home healthy:** children learn to not want foods when it is not there.
- **be realistic:** your child will not always eat the same amount all the time. It can depend on:
 - how hungry they are
 - what they have had to eat and drink that day
 - do not insist that they finish their meal. They are learning to know when they are hungry and full.
- **check portion sizes:** make sure you are not putting too much on your child's plate. A portion of each food offered should fit into your child's palm. So for dinner your child could have a palm sized amount of potato and a palm sized amount of mince. For pudding they could have a palm sized amount of banana.
- **real rewards:** instead of giving food as a reward for good behaviour, give stickers instead. These are just as fun.
- **be consistent:** children like to have something they already know at mealtimes. If you have something new on their plate, try and have something they already like on it too. This will help them to be more relaxed.

Useful websites and apps

Loughborough University has a useful website www.childfeedingguide.co.uk

You can also search for their 'Child feeding guide' app on iTunes or Google play.

This has more tips to help your child



With all of us in mind

Children's speech and language therapy

The Lodge, Kendray Hospital, Doncaster Road, Barnsley, S70 3RD
Tel: 01226 644331 Email: swy-tr.barnsleyspeechtherapy@nhs.net
Website: www.barnsleyspeechtherapy.co.uk

