

**Children’s Speech and Language Therapy  
Good Mealtimes – Do and Don’ts**

Sometimes feeding and mealtimes can be challenging for children and families. Your child may refuse to eat foods. They may only want to eat foods they like. This can be very stressful.

These behaviours are part of normal development for children. At about 2 years of age children have a ‘fear response’ to new or different foods (food neophobia). These problems can range from mild to challenging. These problems can happen for a short or a long time.

What families do at mealtimes makes a big difference to how children behave and what children will and will not eat. Some strategies help and some don’t.

**Mealtime do’s and don’ts**



This is a list of mealtime strategies. The research tells us which help, and which don’t.

Helpful strategies – Do’s	Strategies that do not help – Don’ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Eat with your child at mealtimes</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Let your child see you eat the food they have</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Give your child time</b> – it takes 15-20 times for your child to accept a new food. It can take longer before they try it</li> <li>✓ <b>Pressure free mealtimes</b> – avoid trying to ‘persuade’ your child to eat</li> <li>✓ <b>Be positive</b> – praise positive things like good sitting or tasting a new food</li> <li>✓ <b>Let your child help make food/bake with you</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Fun with food</b> – outside mealtimes do messy food play, sing songs or make food pictures</li> <li>✓ <b>Model good eating habits</b> – if your child refuses foods and wants snack foods, check they are not seeing you eating these foods</li> <li>✓ <b>Make your home healthy</b> – children learn not to want foods that are not there</li> <li>✓ <b>Check portion sizes</b> – a portion of each food offered should fit in your child’s palm</li> <li>✓ <b>Trust you child’s tummy</b> – do not insist they finish their meal. They are learning to know when they are hungry and when they are full</li> <li>✓ <b>Sticker Rewards</b> – offer stickers for good behaviour, not food</li> <li>✓ <b>Have one thing on your child’s plate you know they like.</b> Do not change too many things at once.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× <b>Using food as a reward</b> “if you eat your dinner you can have a biscuit” “If you are good you can have chocolate”</li> <li>× <b>Pressure to eat</b> “just eat that piece” “you can’t leave the table until it’s all gone”</li> <li>× <b>Force feeding your child</b></li> <li>× <b>Putting food in your child’s mouth if they say ‘no’ or turn their head</b></li> <li>× <b>Restricting certain foods</b> Having lots of sweets and unhealthy foods in the house that you do not want your child to eat</li> <li>× <b>Putting too much food on your child’s plate</b></li> <li>× <b>Avoid lots of snacks outside mealtimes</b></li> <li>× <b>Avoid offering milk if your child is thirsty</b> – this will fill them up</li> </ul>

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