

Toddlers and fussy eating

A toddler who refuses to try a new food at least half of the time is a fussy eater. Approximately half of all toddlers fit this description, so it is no surprise that food issues are a source of stress for parents. Eight out of 10 Australian parents are concerned about their child's eating habits. One-third of parents worry that their child isn't eating enough.

Establishing healthy eating patterns is important to avoid problems such as obesity and eating disorders later in life. Various strategies can help your child accept a wider range of foods.

Don't delay introducing 'lumpy' foods

Researchers at Bristol University in England have discovered that delaying your baby's introduction to lumpier foods may contribute to fussy eating habits. 'Lumpy foods' are semi-solids like small bits of cooked soft vegetables or food that is mashed with a fork.

The study focused on a group of babies who were not given lumpy foods until they were 10 months or older. Research found that one in five were fussy eaters by the age of 15 months. Compared to babies who were introduced to lumpy foods between the ages of six and nine months, the fussy eaters were twice as likely to have firm food preferences and were more likely to insist on baby foods well after their first birthday.

This research suggests that giving your baby a wide variety of lumpy or chewy foods between the ages of six and nine months will broaden their food appreciation and reduce the likelihood of fussy eating later on.

Don't be put off by food rejection

Australian research suggests that parents may need to offer an individual food up to 10 times before the baby will choose to eat it. However, around half of parents only persist two or three times before giving up on that particular food altogether.

Parents may be fussy eaters too

Children learn behaviours from their parents. Research indicates that while 27 per cent of toddlers are fussy eaters, 22 per cent of them have parents who admit to being fussy eaters too.

If you restrict yourself to a narrow range of foods, your child will notice and copy your wariness. Don't limit your child's food variety to only those foods you prefer. It may be that your child's tastes are different to yours and perhaps you are simply serving them foods they don't happen to like.

Food and growth

One-third of parents worry that their child isn't eating enough. Unless they are ill, a young child will never voluntarily starve themselves.

If your child seems healthy and energetic, they are eating enough. If you are still concerned, keep an eye on how much food they actually eat over the day. Children tend to graze constantly, rather than restrict their eating to three meals per day like adults. You may be surprised how those little handfuls and snacks add up. For further reassurance, check your child's growth and weight charts or see your doctor or maternal and child health nurse. Remember that your child's growth rate is slowing, so intake may reduce.

Keep calm

Parents who feel worried about their child's eating habits may try to force or cajole their child into eating their meals. If your child resists, mealtimes can become stressful. Try to avoid food becoming a power struggle.

Suggestions include:

- Don't delay introducing lumpy foods.
- Remember that your child will never voluntarily starve themselves. Children are very good at judging their hunger and fullness signals.
- Keep calm and don't make a fuss of whether your child is eating or not. Instead, concentrate on making mealtimes enjoyable family events. If an occasion is enjoyable, your child will want to repeat it
- Be realistic about the amount of effort you put into making your child's meals. Don't feel resentful when they refuse to eat.
- Don't threaten, nag or yell.
- Don't use lollies, chocolates, biscuits, milk or desserts as bribes.

Mealtime strategies

Suggestions include:

- Be a good role model. Eat a wide variety of foods yourself and eat with your child.
- Ask your child to help prepare a meal. They are more likely to eat a meal they have helped to make.
- Set up regular habits for eating, such as always putting your child in their high chair or eating at the same table.
- Offer a range of colourful foods on the plate and allow your child to pick and choose what they will eat from there. Present food attractively.
- Encourage self-feeding and exploration of food from early age. Don't worry about the mess.
- Offer alternative foods from every food group. For example, if your child dislikes cheese, they may eat yoghurt.
- At the end of the meal, take your child's plate away. If they haven't eaten much, offer them a healthy snack a little later on or wait until next mealtime.
- Encourage your child to feed themselves. Make sure you have healthy snacks available. Always supervise their eating, to avoid any risk of choking. Encourage them to eat sitting down, not running around.

Adapt to your child's eating habits

Perhaps part of the problem may be trying to force your child to eat like an adult. Suggestions include:

- Appreciate that your child's stomach is small. Too many drinks of milk or fruit juice may be filling them up.
- Serve child-size meals – they can always ask for more. This generally means three small meals a day, with a snack in between.
- If the family dinner is late in the evening, your child may be too tired to eat. Serve their meal earlier.
- Assess your child's food intake over the week, rather than daily.
- Allow your toddler to identify when they have had enough – this teaches them to listen to their body.

Other contributing factors

Other factors that may be putting your child off food may include:

- Illness
- Tiredness
- Emotional upset.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parent Line Tel. 132 289
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria (24 hours) Tel. 132 229

Things to remember

- Around half of all toddlers refuse to eat a new food at least half of the time.
- Most parents are concerned about their child's eating habits.
- Keep relaxed about mealtimes and offer your child a wide variety of foods.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Tweddle Child and Family Health Services

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