

Eating and drinking

Why might young children refuse to eat or drink?



It is normal for children to go through a phase of refusing some foods. This is a survival mechanism that humans have learned to prevent them eating anything unfamiliar that may be harmful.

Usually, most children will start to eat a wide range of foods again without additional intervention. However, a small group will continue to refuse to try new foods and foods they have previously eaten.

Strategies

While every situation is different, here are some general guidelines for responding when a child is avoiding food or experiencing other difficulties around eating. It's important to act as a detective and unpick the behaviour – we need to understand the cause to help us choose the best preventative method. Some initial things to think about are:

- The amount of milk the child drinks. Milk is filling and the child may use it as a substitute for food.
- Look at what the child eats during the day. Aim to have 3 meals a day, with 2 or 3 snacks; discuss with parents/carers.
- If the child is constipated, they may feel too uncomfortable to eat. Advise parents/carers to seek medical advice from a GP and/or look at eric.org.uk

Environment and resources



- It is important that mealtimes remain calm and happy times for children. The child may find where they are eating their meals and snacks too noisy or the chair they are sitting on uncomfortable. Look at adapting the environment for example using ear defenders, mealtimes when a little quieter, cushion for the chair. Try playing music or read a story in the background to cause a distraction at mealtimes.
- Have regular mealtimes together.
- Having foods in serving dishes – this allows your child to experience new foods without feeling they have to eat them.
- Some children accept new food if the food is separated by using a plate that has different sections.
- Reduce portion size so the child achieves success and might want more.
- Limit the length of mealtimes.
- Use of visuals and timeline to support recognition and what's next around mealtimes
- Try new foods away from a mealtime in a fun way, for example a picnic or tea party. Introduce them gradually.

Activities



- Involving children in food shopping, cooking and preparing the table.
- Keep giving the child the food they already eat.
- Begin by introducing new foods that are similar to those the child already eats. For example, if the child only eats chicken nuggets, try chicken burgers.
- The child will need at least 10 to 20 attempts with a new food before they begin to accept it.

Early Years SEND Self-help Guides – Eating and drinking

- Using small (non-food based) rewards for eating, such as a favourite toy or activity after mealtime.
- Children who continue to refuse new foods may have increased sensitivity to different textures within their mouth. They can also be reluctant to feel new textures with their hands.
- Encouraging messy play with the child, for example finger paints, play dough, gluing, sand and water play.
- Playing games with food. Start with dry foods such as uncooked pasta, lentils, bread sticks in jiffy bags and then explore outside the bags. Move onto wet foods again using jiffy bags such as 'squirty' cream, ketchup, jelly, cooked pasta and then explore outside the bags.
- To move from feeling to eating new foods; at first try touching, then smelling, then licking and then biting. Each of these stages can take time. Repeat this often.
- Children are more likely to try a new food if they have the option of not swallowing. You can show them how to spit it out into a tissue for the first few tries.
- To move on from puréed food, try snacks that melt in the mouth, for example Wotsits, quavers, sponge, Veg stick snacks. Once they are able to swallow a piece of new food, build up how much they eat of it very slowly.

Interactions



- Positive commentary and reaction to small successes.
- Modelling enjoyment of eating and trying new foods.
- Paying attention to signs that the child has had enough to eat and allowing them to finish.
- Recognising when the child is getting stressed and taking action to help them stay calm.
- Try to avoid wiping the child's mouth between mouthfuls; keep this for the end of the meal.
- The child may copy other children in eating new things, so provide opportunities for this.
- Celebrate all efforts at eating and try not to focus on table manners!

What else?



- If you have tried all of the above suggestions over a period of time and you don't feel that you are making any progress. Advise the parent/carer to speak to a health professional, such as a Health Visitor, school nurse or GP.

Useful links

[Sensory Play Toolkit – Home \(weebly.com\)](#)

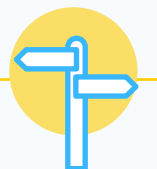
[The Eatwell Guide – NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

[Eating – a guide for all audiences \(autism.org.uk\)](#)

[Occupational Therapy – Resources & Links \(sirona-cic.org.uk\)](#)

[Dingley's Promise](#) – online training module (Behaviour that Challenges)

[Ordinarily Available Provision](#), Bristol's Local SEND Offer



Workforce Development Network