

## Troubleshooting

“If I give something like chicken and chips, my child will only eat the chips and ask for more, saying that they are hungry. What should I do?”

Always give a normal meal. Remind your child, you can leave the food they don't want (chicken) then they won't get anything else until next meal or snack time. Avoid pushing your child to eat. Give a normal meal and don't change portion sizes on the plate. Remember give a limited choice e.g. would you like chicken and chips or meatballs and chips? Remove uneaten food without comment after 30 minutes.

### Remember.....

**You're in charge!**

**Keep calm while they are learning!**

**Keep trying, don't give up!**



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# Fussy Eating What can I do?

A general guide for parents/ carers of pre-school children



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## What is fussy eating?

This means refusing different types of foods. It often means wanting the same foods at every meal, refusing to eat anything or asking for food to look a certain way. It is quite a common cause of worry and upset for parents and children.

Parents want to know that their child is getting the nutrients they need.

## What causes fussy eating?

Most babies are happy to accept new tastes and textures if they are weaned around 6 months. Toddlers often become wary of new foods. This is quite normal and most children gradually grow out of this phase.

At this age, children are learning to be independent. Food is a way to gain control. With lots of encouragement from good role models, children begin to accept a wider range of foods again.

## What can I do?

You may feel that something must be wrong when your child refuses food. Learning to eat is a long process and small changes happen over time as your child grows.



**“I feel like I have tried lots of ways to help my child eat healthier. He just won’t go near vegetables”**

Continue eating vegetables in front your child and continue offering vegetables on their plate. Vegetables are part of everybody’s normal diet. This may take a long time and dozens of attempts, but will help them accept different foods when they are ready.

### Repeated exposure leads to...



If your child doesn't want vegetables on their plate, start with having them nearby on the table. Then try touching them, and work up to letting them touch their lips without putting pressure on them. Many children like to use fingers to eat. Let them make a mess. They may play with food a few times before they feel

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“My child will go for long periods without eating. She would survive on thin air. I’m worried that she isn’t getting enough”

Young children often need less than we expect. They are more likely to eat when you are not hovering over them. Try to avoid watching your child too closely when they are eating. Worrying can make this worse as we try to talk children into eating

### Different portions sizes are needed at different ages

[www.firststepsnutrition.org](http://www.firststepsnutrition.org) has a guide to portion sizes for different age groups.

more. Respect their choice whether to eat a complete meal or not.



“My child refused to eat what I offered and now is complaining of feeling hungry”.

It is easy for parents to give in e.g. make separate meals, give extra snacks. This is likely to keep happening if you give in. You can offer them one of their “safe” foods with their meal and they

## The Golden Rules

**The parent’s job** is to decide **what, when** and **where** foods are offered

**The child’s job** is to decide **whether or not they are hungry** and **how much** to eat

**What?** A good balanced diet for children will contain all of the food groups. (See list of meal pattern ideas on page 4).

**When?** Children like routine and knowing what to expect. Putting a plan in place will help your child learn about a normal meal routine. It also ensures that they are hungry at meal times.

**Where?** It is not always easy to sit down at the table at the same time. Try to aim for this a few times a week. Try to limit distractions like TV or devices. This is the best way to model healthy habits.

**How much?** Children are in charge of their own bodies - they get to decide how much to eat or whether they will eat at all. Sometimes they want very little. If they do not want to eat what they are offered, having a meal structure in place helps them to learn when the next meal is coming.



## Setting a plan

A plan for meal and snack times can help you keep on track. Most young children need to eat small amounts every 2-3 hours and build up to bigger meal portions as they grow. When you are ready to start, explain to your child that you will be doing things differently. You need to tell them what you are going to do e.g. asking them to try new foods.

### Meal pattern ideas

Try to avoid offering the same foods at every meal. A set meal pattern helps children understand that the parent is in charge of the 'what'. This example below is suitable for all the family and can be fitted around your child's routine.



**Breakfast:**  
Wheat biscuit & banana



**Snack:**  
Oatcakes with peanut butter



**Lunch:**  
Tuna & cucumber sandwiches, plain yogurt with a spoonful of fruit puree



**Snack:**  
Rich tea biscuit, grapes



**Tea:**  
Spaghetti bolognese  
Rice pudding

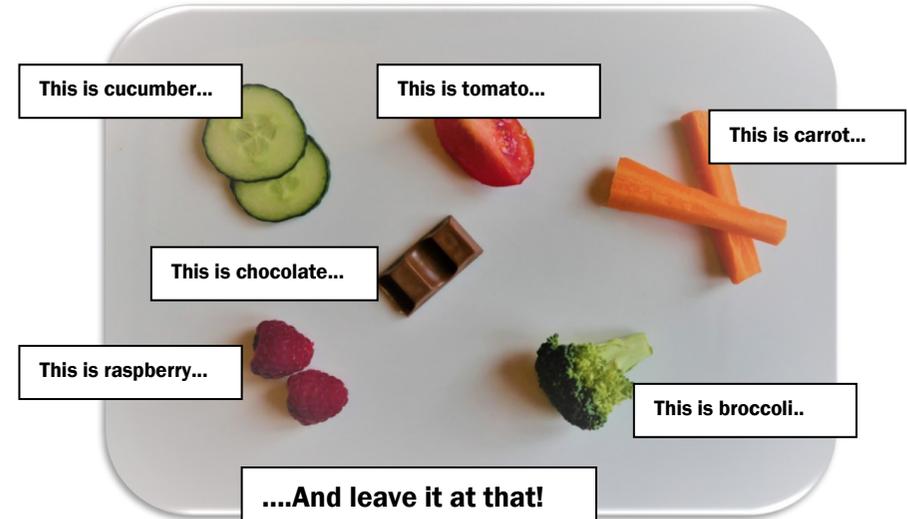


**Supper:**  
Mandarin orange, breadsticks

## No good or bad foods

Try not to label foods good or bad. If your child often asks for snacks, it is good to offer a savoury option rather than a sweet one. Avoid using food as a reward. This encourages children to focus on food.

Try to think of it this way...



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"I feel like whenever I make something healthy or different, my child will refuse it and the food will be wasted"

Try to offer very small tastes while you are offering new foods. At snack time, small pieces of vegetables or fruit are good choices.

Try not to show frustration in front of your child.

## How to build up to new foods

Helping children build a positive relationship with food takes a lot of patience and trials. You can help by

- Serving a new/ disliked food alongside an accepted “safe” food will let your child feel more comfortable with what’s on the plate.
- Food play - making funny food shapes and faces, using fun shaped biscuit cutters with your child.
- Cooking together - even if your child doesn’t always eat the food, it’s a good way to set an example and use their senses to explore food.
- Talking about what they like/ dislike about food (how it looks/ smells/ feels, where it comes from).
- Asking if there is something that they would like to try, or going shopping together to pick out something new.
- Using snack time as an opportunity to try new foods e.g. chopped fruit or vegetables.



## Helpful words to say

“You didn’t like it today, we can try again another time.”

“You can leave your lunch now but your won’t get anything else until snack time.”

## Can I give them a choice?

Some children have a sweet tooth. Not allowing any sweet things can make children want them more. You can guide your child to get the balance right by offering a small amount on occasion. Healthier puddings e.g. a yogurt, custard, jelly, grapes or raisins can be given after a main meal. If your child asks for sweets often, try to limit to a small portion, a few times a week, after a meal.

### What they ask for

(a sweet treat & crackers)



### What I give them

(Grapes, breadsticks and cream cheese)



We can give children a limited choice.

“Would you like peas or carrots?”

“Would you like apple or banana?”

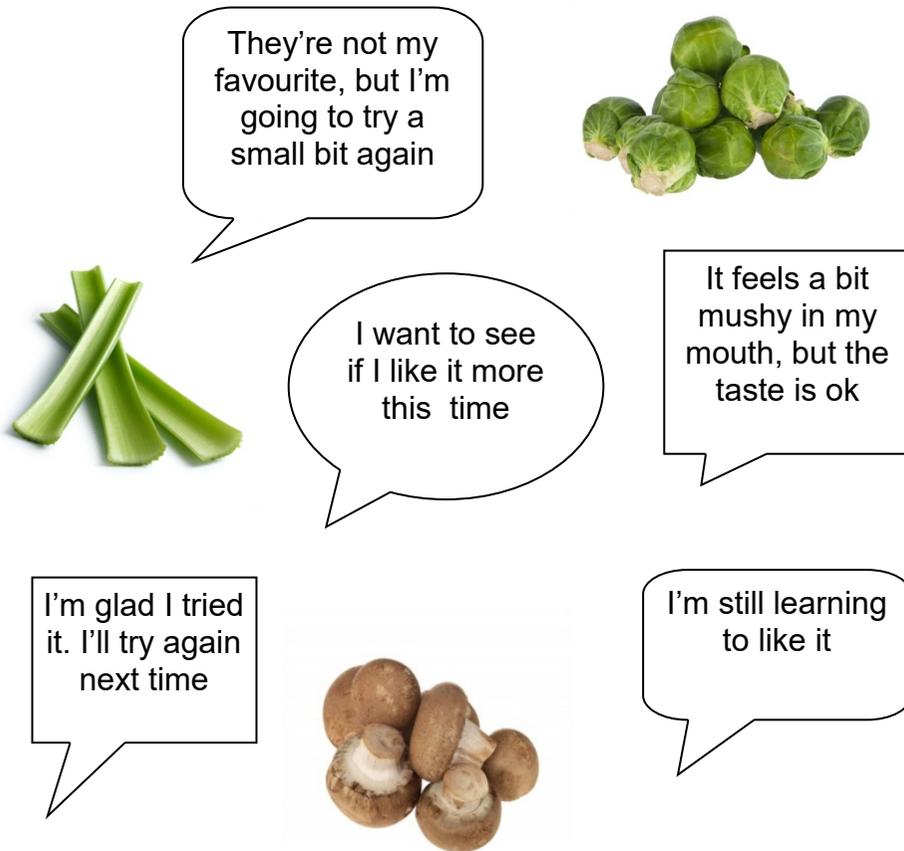
They can choose whether or not to eat all of the meal or snack.

Some days don’t go to plan. You can pick up where they left off and try to follow then plan on good days.

## Modelling healthy habits

Our eating habits and food choices can have a big impact on what our children will eat. Role modelling is about leading by example.

We don't have to like all foods but it is a good idea to keep trying them. Think of a food that you don't like and how it makes you feel. Your child will feel the same way about a food they dislike. By trying food you don't like in front of them, you are showing that you are willing to give it another go.



They're not my favourite, but I'm going to try a small bit again

I want to see if I like it more this time

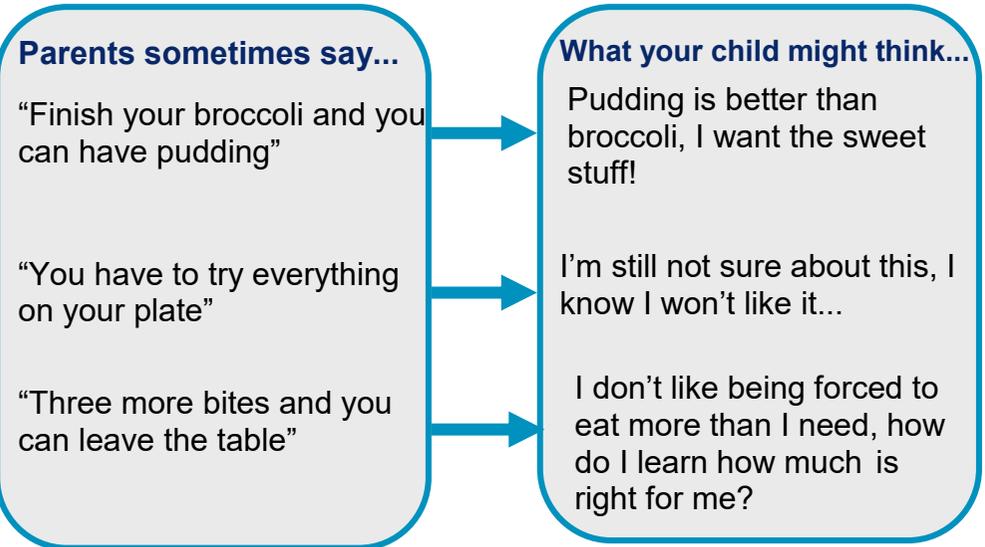
I'm glad I tried it. I'll try again next time

It feels a bit mushy in my mouth, but the taste is ok

I'm still learning to like it

## Food talk: Avoid pressure to eat

This often has the opposite effect of what we want children to do. By letting them decide what they like and how much they want to eat, they will be much more relaxed at mealtimes.



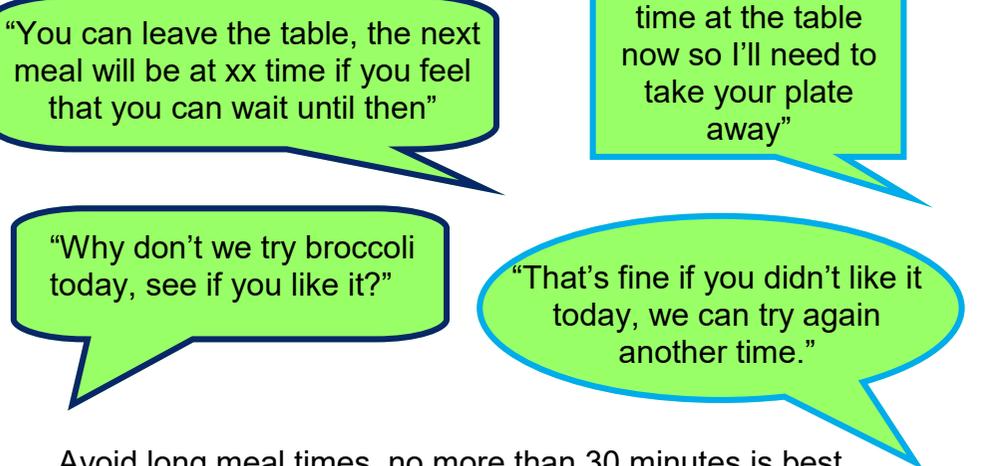
**Parents sometimes say...**

- "Finish your broccoli and you can have pudding"
- "You have to try everything on your plate"
- "Three more bites and you can leave the table"

**What your child might think...**

- pudding is better than broccoli, I want the sweet stuff!
- I'm still not sure about this, I know I won't like it...
- I don't like being forced to eat more than I need, how do I learn how much is right for me?

### More helpful language:



"You can leave the table, the next meal will be at xx time if you feel that you can wait until then"

"Are you finished? We've had enough time at the table now so I'll need to take your plate away"

"Why don't we try broccoli today, see if you like it?"

"That's fine if you didn't like it today, we can try again another time."

Avoid long meal times, no more than 30 minutes is best.