



Hunsbury Park Primary School

**A Parent's Guide  
To  
Coping With Fussy Eaters**

## COPING WITH FUSSY EATERS

For some children, fussy eating means refusing all types of fruit and vegetables. Others want the same food at every meal, or insist on food of a certain colour. Most pre-school children will, at some time, experience some problems with eating, some may only eat a small number of different foods or eat very little or sometimes refuse to eat altogether. But it will probably be a passing phase.

### Coping with a change in routine

Families living with a faddy eater often find themselves under additional stress when there's a change in routine. Holidays abroad can be difficult and as your child gets older they may avoid sleepovers or friends' birthday parties because of food concerns. Food is one of the few things that a child has control over and refusing to eat or rejecting foods are common 'assertive' behaviours. Experts agree this rarely leads to eating disorders.

"If the child is thriving and there are no problems with growth and development, it is better to leave well alone. More than likely they will grow out of it," adds Claudine. Anita Bean, registered nutritionist and author of *Healthy Eating for Kids* agrees. "Children do not voluntarily starve themselves. They are programmed for survival - as long as there is food available, children will make sure they get enough."

"Some children are very good at using food to wind up their parents. They know that food refusal results in attention, even unfavourable, and so a vicious cycle sets up." Vivien Wigg, Senior Paediatric Dietician at [Great Ormond Street Hospital](#), sees many children who are afraid or suspicious of new foods (called neophobia). She says it may take months or even years before they are ready to try new things.

Parents of fussy eaters worry that if it carries on long-term, it could stunt development. However, children with selective eating have a very good long-term outlook, adds Claudine. Their diets usually contain enough protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins and minerals so they will be healthy and grow normally, she says. "If your child is not upset or worried about eating, then there is little that you need to do. You should try to accept the narrow diet, expecting that it will become wider in time."

By the time they become teenagers, almost all will have grown out of it. Even the approximate 1% who carry on to be selective eaters as adults don't appear to have any long-term consequences.

### Tips on encouraging your child to eat

#### Do's...

- Do have structured meal-times. Don't rush. Avoid talking about food and try not to put pressure on the situation.
- Do let your children see that you enjoy eating healthy meals. "They are more likely to eat foods that they have seen you eat," explains Anita.
- Do praise your child when they try something new - but don't overdo it.
- Do get your children involved in cooking, advises Anita. "This will increase their interest in the food, and they're more likely to eat a meal they've helped prepare."
- Do think of different ways to present foods, says Vivien: "Your child may refuse fresh tomato but accept a tomato-based pizza, for example. Some parents disguise fruit and vegetables, pureeing vegetables into a mince-based dish, or using fruit purees in jellies and in cooking."
- Do set a time limit of, say 20-30 minutes for the meal. If the food isn't eaten, take it away.

#### Don'ts...

- "Don't ever bribe children," warns Vivien. "It's a very common mistake to make but avoid it at all costs, particularly rewarding children with a pudding."
- Don't get cross: Refusing food loses its appeal if you don't react, explains Anita.

- Don't provide an alternative meal. "Just remove the meal and make no comment," says Vivien. "Offer bread and butter and perhaps a glass of milk but never cook multiple meals as your child could misconstrue it as a game."
- Don't let your child fill up between meals on snacks, juice and fizzy drinks.
- Don't let your child hear you talking about how fussy they are," warns Vivien. "This will only make an issue of their eating habits and make them feel isolated and singled out."

### **Try these...**

- Make sure your child is hungry before mealtimes.
- Let them serve themselves. Put the food in dishes so they can choose how much to take.
- Think small: A big pile of food on the plate can be off-putting for children. Try tiny broccoli florets, small squares of toast, super-thin apple slices.
- Serve a new food with a food they like: mix an unfamiliar food, like peppers, into pasta sauce, soup, or curry – but don't try and hide them under other foods otherwise you risk the whole meal being rejected.
- Keep trying! If a food is rejected, it doesn't mean they will never eat it. Children's tastes do change over time. It can take up to eight to 10 attempts to get a child to eat a new food.
- Invite other children round who you know eat heartily! Experiments have shown that children often copy their peers at meal times.

### **Getting further help or support:**

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

[www.gosh.nhs.uk](http://www.gosh.nhs.uk)

[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)