

# Selective Eating in Children

Children's Dietetic Service



## Introduction

When children refuse to eat or avoid lots of foods, it can leave parents feeling worried and frustrated.

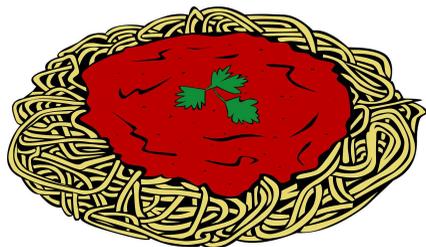
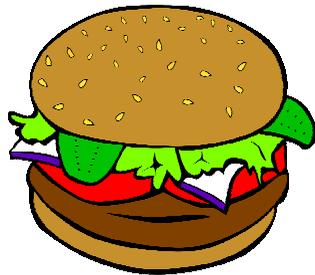
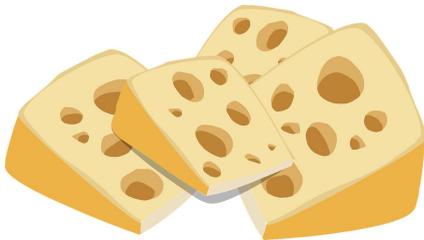
Food refusal (either the refusal of new foods or the refusal of foods that were once eaten without any fuss) reflects a basic fear response. This fear response is a normal part of a child's development and peaks around 2 years of age. This fear of new foods (called food neophobia) means that foods which look different are rejected on sight without tasting.

Children who are anxious and sensory-sensitive are more likely to be highly food neophobic. By five years of age, most children will have started to move on from the neophobic stage. As children grow, they start to make decisions about food based on copying those around them. They also learn about food similarities, for example *'I like this bread so I will like that bread too; all bread will taste the same'*. However, children with selective eating behaviour:

- stay in the neophobic stage and their diet becomes more restricted
- pay attention to the small details of the foods they eat and may be loyal to specific brands/packaging
- are often not motivated to change and do not see the need to imitate others.

A small number of children have a fear of being sick when they eat or of choking or not being able to swallow. Other children may worry that a food is bad or harmful in some way.

Any phobia is treated by gradually increasing an individual's exposure to the thing they fear. This same technique is used to encourage children to accept new foods or re-accept previously liked foods.



## Top Tips for Parents and Carers

- Be good to yourself and keep calm. Some parents may feel guilty and blame themselves for their child's eating difficulties. Do not blame yourself for things you wish you had done differently. Focus on what can be done now and in the future.
- Make sure everyone involved in your child's care is consistent in their approach including partners, grandparents and childminders, nursery and school.
- Be patient. There are no 'quick fixes'. It can take a long time for behaviour to significantly change.
- Never force feed your child.
- Encourage independence - if your child can physically feed themselves, then this should be encouraged. Your child then has control over how much and how quickly they eat. In general we all feel more relaxed when we are in control of a situation and your child will likely feel the same way.
- Get your child involved in shopping, preparing and cooking food.
- Be a role model - children learn by example.

Do not allow your child to go more than 3 hours without eating, but try to avoid grazing. Scheduling regular meals and snack times is a good way to help your child regulate their appetite and maintain energy levels. For example:

- 08.00 - Breakfast
- 10.30 - Snack at school
- 13.00 - Lunch
- 15.30 - Snack after school
- 18.00 - Dinner
- 20.30 - Snack before bed



## Positive Communication

Keep a smiley face around food. If you are making a '*yuck I wouldn't eat that*' face, your child will read that and respond accordingly.

Give attention for any good progress with specific praise. Avoid giving your child more attention when they don't eat than when they do. Try to keep neutral if a food is refused '*we'll try that another day*'.

Avoid asking questions that can be answered with '*no*'. For example, instead of asking '*are you going to eat that toast?*' ask '*which bit are you going to eat first?*'.

Use positive language – instead of '*don't throw the food*' you can say '*food stays on the table*'. This teaches your child what you want them to do, instead of what they shouldn't do.

Avoid describing your child as '*difficult*' or as a '*fussy eater*' in front of them.

Try not to use food as a bribe. Expressions such as "*you can't have any pudding until you finish that broccoli*" may serve to make the food even less appealing. Emotional language such as '*mummy would be really happy if you would eat a little bit more*' should also be avoided.

## Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Eating can cause significant anxiety and severe behaviour problems for some children with ASD. Autism affects how children think and how they experience different situations. Food is an emotional issue as well as having a strong physical effect and together this can create a lot of potential difficulties:

**Communication** - when it is hard to communicate with other people, it is difficult to express when you are hungry or full or which foods you prefer and why. If a child cannot say that they have eaten enough, they may start to throw or play with food. A child who wants to eat something different may grab food off other plates.

**Social Interaction** - children with autism can struggle to grasp and follow social rules especially around mealtimes e.g. sit up, eat nicely, and don't play with food. Eating may feel like it is all rules with little reward.

**Lack of Adaptability** - some children will get fixed on certain foods and how they are prepared or presented. This may lead to difficulties when packaging changes or brands are discontinued or when food is offered in the 'wrong' way e.g. on a different plate or cut into the wrong shape. Food is difficult to keep exactly the same and some children with autism struggle with this.

**Motor or sensory issues** - some children will be over or under sensitive to certain sensations including food. A child whose mouth is very sensitive may only want to eat bland or soft foods but a child whose mouth sensations are dulled may prefer strong tasting or crunchy foods to give some stimulation.

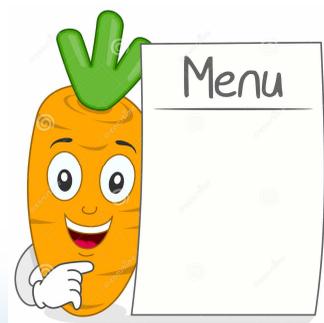
The smell, temperature and texture of food as well as the environment where it is offered can affect what is eaten. Some children may have motor problems which make it difficult to bite or chew or swallow properly; others may struggle to eat with cutlery by themselves.



**Medical issues** – bowel problems such as chronic constipation or diarrhoea may lead to pain or discomfort, dehydration or lack of appetite which will affect whether a child wants to eat.

## Managing Meal Times

- Encourage family meals even if you are eating different food. Mealtimes are not just about food but are an important time for children to socialise and learn.
- Allow enough time for meals but don't let them drag on too long. Aim for no longer than 30 minutes.
- Focus on the good things your child is doing. Remember to give other children praise if they eat a wider variety of foods.
- Let children get involved with laying the table and preparing and serving food.
- Be persistent! Just because a food is declined the first time does not mean you should not keep offering.
- Keep portions on the smaller side or let a child serve themselves if this is appropriate. Seeing too much food on a plate can be overwhelming. Seconds can always be offered.
- Some children may not like the feeling of cutlery in their mouth. It is worth trying plastic cutlery to see if this is preferred.
- Planning a written or visual menu at the start of each week can help to reduce anxiety as your child will know what to expect.



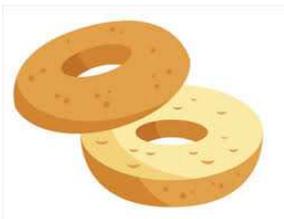
## Strategies to try

Tricks such as hiding extra vegetables in pasta sauce or vitamin supplements in a drink sometimes works but can also backfire. Sometimes after finding additions to 'safe' foods children learn to be suspicious of all foods and will limit their diet further. If your child is very sensitive to the smell, taste or texture of a food, it may be harder to hide additions.

### **Get a feel for your child's tastes/preferences**

It is often useful to start by looking at foods your child already eats. Consider their 'safe' foods. What do they prefer regarding the colour, texture, temperature or smell?

**Food chaining** is a way of moving children on to a wider range of foods based on ones they already like. It involves gradually introducing new foods which have the same features (colour / texture etc.) as those your child prefers. This process helps your child become more flexible and can build confidence. Making one small change to their diet increases their belief that they can continue to make more changes.



## Food chaining can be broken down into stages:

1	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Expanding on tastes and textures</b></p> <p>This involves trying other brands, sizes and shapes of your child's favourite food. For example, if a child enjoys eating a particular brand of white bread, consider introducing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smaller sized loaf</li><li>• Thinner/thicker slices</li><li>• Wholemeal bread / 50:50 brands</li><li>• French sticks</li><li>• Ciabatta</li></ul>
2	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Vary taste and maintain texture</b></p> <p>Try different flavour variations of the same food. For example, try garlic, wholemeal and cheesy bread. Use sauces and dips to encourage new flavours.</p>
3	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Maintain taste and vary texture</b></p> <p>Try to give foods with the same flavour but in different texture forms. For example, offer toasted bread, pittas, English muffins, crumpets or bagels.</p>
4	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Vary both taste and texture</b></p> <p>Try to offer foods which are both similar and different. For example offer croutons, pancakes, cheese straws, croissants etc.</p>

## **Introducing New Foods**

Many parents will start by introducing new foods on a child's plate at the dinner table. For more selective eaters it is often important to take a more gradual approach. There are several strategies to consider when presenting foods for the first time:

### **Messy play**

Messy play encourages children to become comfortable with the senses of different foods through play. By playing with food, a child can explore new foods whilst getting used to the smell and texture without any pressure to eat. Messy play should be in a relaxed environment away from meal times. For further information please refer to our messy play booklet.

### **Steps to eating**

It is important to remember that children may need to take several 'stepping stones' before accepting any new foods. Start by thinking about what happens when your child is currently presented with a new food. Are they happy to accept it in their space at the table or touch it? If they are not able to do this, asking them to eat a new food is unlikely to be successful. Aim to increase your child's exposure to new foods by using the steps below as a guide.

**Step 6:**

Chewing and swallowing the food.

**Step 5:**

Nibbling or biting on the food. Allow your child to spit this out initially to encourage progress.

**Step 4:**

Licking the new food

**Step 3:**

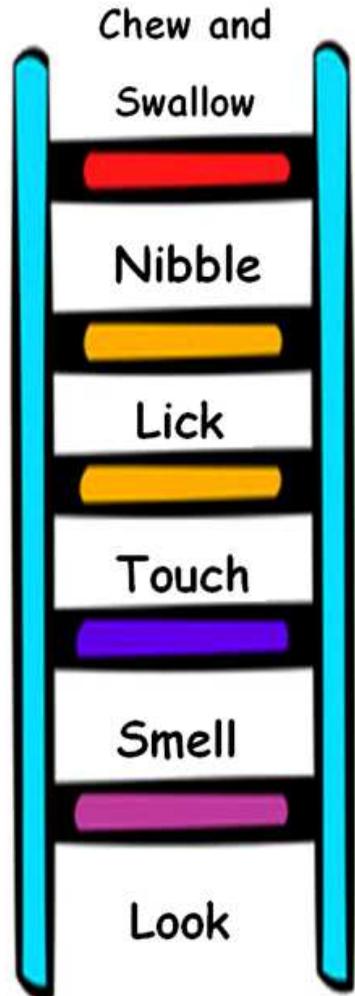
Using utensils to touch or interact with the food

**Step 2:**

Smelling the food (where appropriate)

**Step 1:**

Being comfortable looking at a new food or accepting a new food near them (on a separate plate / bowl to their trusted foods)



## **Tiny Tastes**

When children are presented on a daily basis with the same food they are more likely to accept this. It is more successful if a child is able to choose the food to try. The 'tiny taste' which is expected of them may only be a nibble of a new food but this is sufficient. The same food should be presented at least 10 times and in various different forms (e.g. carrot batons / spheres / mashed etc.)

If it is too stressful or impractical to offer a new food on a daily basis, agree 'tasting times' with your child. This should be on a minimum of 2 days per week.

## **Rewards**

For children who respond well to reward or praise, a sticker chart or reward system may help a child to move through the steps to eating. Children should never be punished if they refuse to try a step but it should be clear that there is no reward.

Older children may benefit from a pasta jar reward system. Each time they make a positive attempt, a piece of dry pasta is added to a jar. When the jar is full, the child gets an agreed reward. The size of the jar will determine how quickly a child gets their reward.

## Final Thoughts

**Structure** - Have set times for a meal and snacks. It is important that when new foods are presented, your child is hungry in order to motivate them to eat. Ensure that meal times do not last longer than 30 minutes. After this time, calmly remove the food from the table.

**Expectations** - Ensure that whenever a new food is going to be tried that your child has plenty of warning about this. For example, saying '*we're going to try a new shape of pasta for dinner tonight*' will help them feel more comfortable and to prepare for when this is in front of them at the dinner table.

**Environment** - Try to ensure that meal times are a positive place and that no pressure is placed on a child. If distraction helps your child to feel more comfortable, consider playing music or having their favourite character eat the same food as them.

## Further Information

### Websites

[www.childfeedingguide.co.uk](http://www.childfeedingguide.co.uk)

[www.weightconcern.org.uk/tinytastes](http://www.weightconcern.org.uk/tinytastes)

### Books

Food Refusal and Avoidant Eating in Children including those with autism spectrum conditions – Gillian Harris and Elizabeth Shea 2018

For further information about this service contact:

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