

Meal time strategies for parents

Meal times for those children with fussy tummies can quickly become a challenge. Below are some tips to help make meal times less stressful.

Creating a routine

Children respond well to different aspects of their day when they know what to expect.

- Try to fit three meals and two snack times into your child's day.
- Limit meal times to half an hour, after this your child may not eat much more.
- When eating, talk as a family. Try to keep conversation light-hearted and not focused on food.
- Offer a healthy pudding whether or not the main meal was eaten.
- Consider a visual timetable for meal times.

Choosing what to eat

- Think about textures of foods your child likes. For example, if they like dried cereal, think of foods with similar consistencies, such as vegetable crisps.
- Give your child a choice, even if it is something as simple as "Would you like Weetabix or Rice Krispies?" or "Would you like to pour the milk or would you like me to pour the milk?"
- If your child rejects a food, offer small amounts of different food.
- Consider introducing brand new foods separate to meal times. For example, during tasting times or sensory play.

Getting used to food

Sometimes children don't engage with their food because it is unfamiliar to them. Getting them to play and be involved with making food can help.

- Try baking with your child. Get them actively involved in choosing a recipe, making it, and tasting the end product.
- Have a birthday party or picnic for some of their stuffed toys. Get them to choose a menu and help you make the food.
- Let your child help you set the table for meal times.
- Role play eating outside of meal times. This can reduce pressure when it comes to eating meals.

Praise and rewards

Remember to encourage what your child is doing well throughout their day, as this builds self-esteem and confidence.

- Try giving praise and attention away from meal times. If your child gets most of your undivided attention when they are being fussy at meal times, they may continue to do so – they think any attention is good attention.
- Try and arrange something fun to do after the meal. For example, "After the meal, we can watch your favourite film", something to look forward to can take the focus off of eating.
- Children learn from modelling behaviour. If you enjoy your food and finish your portions they are likely to see this as normal.