

# How to cope at mealtimes

A guide for parents



West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)

## Introduction

Meals and mealtimes can be among the most worrying times for parents and often become a battleground between parents and children. Parents sometimes judge themselves on how well their children eat. The sort of problems most commonly experienced are:

- Poor table manners
- Refusal to eat
- Taking a long time to eat a meal
- Fussy eating
- Not sitting at the table
- Fighting or having tantrums during mealtimes
- Playing with, or throwing, food.

Whatever problems you face, if your child is growing, is healthy and has plenty of energy, then relax. You are probably doing a much better job than you give yourself credit for. It is very common for children to eat a limited range of food. The more you “push” a child to eat, the more likely problems are to arise.

It is also worth remembering that children's appetites vary from meal to meal and from day to day. Every child has a different appetite. Don't expect them all to eat the same amount or the same variety.

It is also important to remember that young children play with their food. This is a normal part of growing up, it is also a messy one! Your child is simply exploring food, playing with new textures, learning how to use fingers and cutlery. You shouldn't stop them doing this, no matter how messy they are, as problems may begin if they cannot learn about food through play.

Most children eat breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, mid-afternoon snack, dinner and possibly a supper. Use routines and cut out snacking between these times.

Mealtimes are an opportunity for children to develop their social skills. Children will learn to communicate by listening and watching their parents, as well as having a go themselves in a friendly atmosphere. Meals can be a time when the whole family can relax

and catch up about the day. It is often the only time that families can get together.

## **The setting**

If you are having problems you may need to think about changing the mealtime routines. The following points are 'ideals' and it is not always possible in busy households to achieve all of them. However, you should try to put into practice as many of the following as you can.

### **Where and when you eat:**

- Sit and eat at a table.
- Have meals at the same time each day (see above)
- Present the children's food in as creative and fun a way as you can. Children's cookbooks from your local library can give great hints on how to make food look fun.

For example, you can make a snail from mashed potato as its shell and little sausages for the tail and peas and carrots for eyes and antennae. You can put a bunny face on a pizza using courgettes for ears, olives for eyes and nose, carrots for whiskers and sweet-corn for teeth. Finally, baked potato halves can be made into boats with cheese triangles for sails, carrot sticks for masts and a red pepper flag.

Let your imagination go wild! Children themselves can come up with great ideas too.

- Have time limited meals, 10-15 minutes for younger children and 20-30 minutes as they get older. Clear plates at end of meal regardless of how much they have eaten
- Between meals, don't give snacks (except mid morning and mid afternoon) and cut out constant drinking, especially fizzy drinks and lots of milk. Dietitians recommend a pint of full cream milk per day for children. Try to stick to this, as milk and fizzy juices can make the child feel full and thus cut their appetite.

## **Make mealtimes a family event:**

- If possible, the whole family should eat together. Children will not suffer if you have to delay the meal for a while until the whole family can be at home
- Have as few distractions as possible, e.g. turn off the TV
- Model good eating, as children learn from your example
- Encourage the children to join in with the conversation. Discuss non-food related topics and ask for their opinions and views. Relax and concentrate on having conversations. A relaxed atmosphere, where you are not commenting on their faults, will help your child feel more like eating.

## **Helping 'difficult' eaters**

### **The picky child:**

- Take a step back. Look at how you and other adults close to your child, approach food and mealtimes. Children will copy eating patterns by observing you and listening to how you talk about food. Don't be surprised if they refuse to eat fruit, when you often say you hate it or you do not eat fruit yourself. If you snack all day, rather than eat meals, your child may learn to do the same.
- Don't give your child lots of choices. It is overwhelming and confusing. You should offer what the family is having plus only one other option your child likes. Do this well in advance to avoid last minute disputes
- Don't give them food you know they do not like or will not eat
- Praise your child when they eat
- Praise any attempt to try something new
- If your child doesn't eat the meal, they will need to wait until the next mealtime/snacktime, even if they are hungry

- **Do not** give into requests for food in between meals. If you do, they will continue to refuse food at mealtimes.

### **The child who behaves badly:**

- Ignore inappropriate behaviour, such as noises, faces and fidgeting. If you pay attention to these behaviours, they are likely to happen more often
- Praise good table manners, e.g. sitting, using cutlery
- Use natural consequences, e.g. if the child throws food, he/she can't eat it and will need to clean it up at the end of the meal.

### **Children who don't eat enough**

#### **Remember:**

- All children have different needs. Just because your oldest child “ate like a horse”, doesn't mean your next one will
- Make sure the child isn't “grazing”. It is tempting to try and “top up” picky eaters constantly. This will stop them ever feeling properly hungry
- Don't allow your child to fill themselves up on juice or other drinks
- Children may be more interested in food if they are allowed to be involved in shopping for, preparing, cooking and serving food
- Don't force your child to eat, the best way is not to nag or comment at all if they don't eat
- Praise any effort they make to eat.

### **Giving correct portions and food:**

- Put small portions on the plate, or allow them to serve their own portions. Children are put off by plates piled with food. It is better if they ask for more, than can't finish what they have. This will also give you the opportunity to praise them and give the child a sense of achievement and pride
- At first, offer the child the foods he/she will eat and then add a very small portion of a new food. You can also encourage them to try a bit of your “grown up” food. In addition, you can ask them to try a spoonful of a new food, one of a favourite food, one of the new food, and so on.
- If they try a new food, give it again at several other mealtimes. It takes a while to get used to new tastes and build up a liking for them
- Experiment with lots of different food, you may strike on an unlikely successful option
- Gradually increase the meal sizes and variety over many weeks and months.

### **Some advice on child-friendly, healthy foods from our dietitians**

If introducing new foods, try to find ones that are similar in colour and texture to the ones your child does eat. For example, if a child will eat yoghurt, try them on custard. Another strategy is to try a wide variety of tastes, as you might hit upon an unlikely success.

- **Fruit:** You can try dry or tinned fruit, as well as fresh fruit. It can be mixed into jelly or chopped together and served with ice-cream at the end of a meal.
- **Vegetables:** Some children prefer rows of carrot sticks and so on, to cooked vegetables. It is also worth knowing that even chips have a good Vitamin C content. To minimise the unhealthy side, try serving bigger chips in preference to thin fries, as they soak up less fat.
- **Cheese:** All types of cheese are good food. You can try cubes, slices, spreading, triangles and so on.

- **Crisps:** Again, they are not as unhealthy as we might think, but don't offer more than one packet each day as they are salty.
- **Biscuits:** Offer these instead of a pudding, plain digestives, hobnobs, flapjacks, oatcakes and so on are fine with occasional chocolate ones.
- **Bread and toast:** Can be used as a handy snack, or for pre-bed supper.

### **Some advice from our Paediatric Dentists**

Frequent sugary snacks attack children's teeth throughout the day and will make the teeth decay. It is best to avoid sugary snacks between meals, so try to save sweet things to enjoy at main mealtimes.

Good "teeth-friendly" snacks could include fresh fruit and crunchy vegetables, bread, toast, pitta bread and bread snacks. Encourage children to drink water and milk with snacks and when thirsty. Diluting juice contains natural sugars so keep it for an occasional treat at a mealtime.

**Remember:** brush your teeth and gums twice a day to keep teeth healthy. Use a fluoride toothpaste that has over 1000 ppm F listed in the ingredients (e.g. Colgate Bugs Bunny and Tweetie Pie, Macleans Milk Teeth Fluoride Plus or an adult Fluoride toothpaste). Spit, don't rinse the toothpaste, at the end of brushing.

### **Finally...**

Follow the advice above, in addition to the advice you get from your GP or health visitor, and you will find that your child will slowly begin to eat as you hope they will. These professionals will also know when, and to whom, to refer your child to if the problems don't get any better.

Don't panic, if your child is growing and energetic, the problem is not as serious as you may think. The secret to coping with all kinds of mealtime difficulties lies in remaining calm and taking a cool approach to the problem.



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