

# Fussy Eaters and Long Term Conditions

## Child Health Psychology



Many parents worry their child isn't eating enough and when your child has a long-term health condition it can cause even more stress as you know it could impact on their health and that their medical team will be monitoring their diet and weight regularly.

It is important to know that it is common for children to go through phases of refusing to eat or to try certain foods. This is a normal part of growing up and children often need time to learn to like new foods. How you organise mealtimes, and react to their eating can have a big impact on what they will eat.

### How parents naturally and commonly react:

- Prompt a child to eat or encourage them by making a deal e.g. "if you eat your vegetables, you can have some cake"
- Ask questions about why they won't eat
- Become frustrated

These responses aren't usually helpful and can make it more likely the child won't eat, as they are getting their parents' attention, and feel some control.

The way that you react to your child's behaviour at meal times can teach them how you would like them to behave. For example, if your child is praised for eating, they are more likely to spend more time eating.

### Tips for happy meal times:

- Praise your child if they are eating or otherwise behaving well around mealtimes. This can build your child's self-confidence. Be specific and tell them exactly what they did right, be excited and show love e.g. "you came to the table when I asked, I love that, thank you!" Behaviours to praise include coming to the table when asked, staying in their seat, picking up and using a utensil, taking a bite, trying new food.
- Do not react if your child is not eating. Stay calm and focus on another member of your family or your own food. As soon as your child engages with eating, praise them straightaway.
- Try not to use favourite foods as a reward as this can make them become more valued. Instead you could reward your child with other small items, such as stickers, for good mealtime behaviour.
- Make sure other people who eat with you know how you would like them to respond to your child's behaviour during meal times, since different responses from different people can confuse your child.
- Offer a variety of food each day and make meals colourful and interesting.
- Do not have distractions at the table e.g. toys and T.V. Talk as a family, instead.
- Plan your meals and snacks so your child eats regularly and has enough time to eat, however, do not let meals drag on for too long (maximum 1/2hr)

### When to see your dietitian:

A dietitian can provide practical help and advice on your child's diet. It is important to see your dietitian regularly as they can assess your child's growth and give advice on their diet to ensure they are reaching their full health and growth potential.

### When to see your psychologist:

The psychologist can help you to look at how to manage mealtimes, or other worries about your child's eating, in order to reduce stress for everyone and improve your child's eating.