



Fostering Healthy Eating Behaviours and Habits

Are you concerned about your child's eating habits?



■ It is common for toddlers and preschoolers to be 'picky' as they:

- Become interested in exploring the world around them.
- Are learning to be independent and they want to have control.
- Start to be cautious about new foods.
- May experience different emotions and energy levels each day, at different times of the day, that can affect their appetite.

■ Children may:

- Prefer your food to their own.
- Have less appetite one meal or day but can eat a lot the next.
- Eat small meals throughout the day.
- Refuse a food they previously liked.
- Be reluctant to try new food.

Families can prevent and help improve 'picky eating' by establishing good mealtime practices.



Before the meal

Set consistent mealtime routines and structures

Establish routines such as eating at regular timings, sitting at the table and having meals together to facilitate positive experiences around food.



Promote appetite by limiting access to foods and milk two hours before a main meal

Children tend to eat and be willing to try new foods when they feel hungry.

Make an effort and be creative in preparing for a meal

Involve children in meal preparation activities such as washing vegetables, setting the table, choosing the food or present food attractively.

During the meal

Be a role model. Eat together and model good eating habits.

Children learn best from watching others. Parents should eat a varied and well-balanced diet. They should also avoid screen time and distractions.

Serve a variety of foods and textures appropriate for their age

Provide foods from all food groups, in appropriate textures for your child's age. Beyond 1 year old, your child should be eating just like you.

Be realistic about portion sizes

Being precise about the portion sizes may not be helpful for children, as they can eat varying amounts from meal to meal, and day to day. Children should be encouraged to respond accordingly to their hunger and fullness cues. They do not need to 'clean the plate'.

For toddlers, usual portions are up to a quarter of an adult meal; for children aged three to six years, this would be a third to half of an adult portion.

Keep mealtimes positive!

Talk about your child's day instead of focusing on the food. Avoid scolding, forcing or threatening. You can also praise your child for his efforts (e.g. "You tasted a bit of the broccoli, well done!").





How can I introduce new foods to my child?

- Offer your child new foods together with preferred foods.
- Offer new foods in small amounts.
- If your child rejects the new food, offer it again after two to three days. Children may require exposure to the new food on 10 to 20 different occasions before accepting it.



Most children outgrow 'picky eating' behaviours by school-going age. However, for a small group of picky eaters, their growth and development may be negatively affected.

For further help

For holistic assessment, intervention and support for picky eaters who do not improve with the strategies above, doctors may refer families to the following professionals:

- **Dietitians**

To assess nutritional adequacy and provide strategies to increase food variety and/or specific foods to target key nutrients of concern.

- **Speech or Occupational Therapists (SPOT clinic)**

To help children and families develop successful feeding skills.

