

Let's take a fresh look at fussy eating

As a childhood nutritionist, fussy eating is one of the most common concerns I hear from parents. Having lived through the fussy eating years, its interesting to reflect back on the misconceptions that I once had, particularly in relation to the theory of what is supposed to help fussy eaters eat. In hindsight, having a realistic view based on actual experience might have prevented some of those mealtime battles that we all inevitably fall into at some point.

Why is my child a fussy eater?

If you refer to the literature, a common classification of a fussy eater (a term that is vague to say the least) is a child (generally referring to toddlers) who refuses to try a new food at least half of the time. Not surprisingly about 50 per cent of toddlers fit this description. I wouldn't mind betting that an even greater number of preschoolers fit the bill also.

Children reject foods for many reasons. One very common reason is that they are suspicious of new things and they have an increasing ability to exercise their independence or control. Of course, they may find the appearance and smell of the food off-putting or see other family members or their peers rejecting the food and wonder why they should be made to eat it. They may even be having trouble getting the food onto a fork or into their mouths. There are many possible explanations for fussy eating and each child will be different.

The truth about fussy eating

There are, however, four truths about fussy eating. It:

1. Is a nutritional challenge
2. Is a very normal stage
3. Will generally pass
4. Can be a source of exasperation and even stress

If you have ever sought advice about fussy eating or researched the topic you will have noted a common thread...

- Be a good role model
- Keep offering healthy food, but don't worry if it's rejected
- Eat as a family
- It will pass
- Healthy children won't starve themselves

And while these are excellent recommendations, all of which will help in the long (long) run, in the short term they tend to leave you feeling like things will never improve. I get many parents, with desperation in their voices, asking me, 'What can I do now? I have tried all the things I was told to do. Nothing works.'

Dismay no more... you will get there, but what might help you along the way is to understand a few simple realities and to keep them in mind before you head to the pantry and fridge tonight.

Reality 1: Natural childhood suspicion is a factor

The reality is that children are naturally suspicious of new things. Perhaps it's a survival mechanism? Hence fussy eating hits when children begin to gain some sense of their independence and control (there are some days of course where, as parents, it can feel like we have none of either).

One of the most powerful tools in coping with fussy eating is to slowly but consistently dismantle the natural barrier of resistance to new foods.



There are so many ways you can bring Mohammed to the mountain. For example:

- Have your child help select produce, eg. show them how to choose the best avocado
- Create a hands-on experience by enlisting the children to help in growing vegetables in your own garden or starting a school garden
- Involve them in the harvesting, preparation of meals, baking, cooking and so on
- Encourage your child to assist with other food-related tasks, such as setting the table

Involvement in food has been shown to be a critical aspect in improving fussy eating habits. It really does work, though not overnight. It's an ongoing process.

Reality 2: When they say 'it will pass', it may not mean anytime soon

'How long will this go on for?' I hear you ask, despairing of your little one's nutrition. You will have been told at least once that it is a normal stage and it will pass. This could mean in a few days or months, a little like teething, but in reality is it is more likely that you will notice improvements towards the school years (coinciding with a greater acceptance of things unknown). Yes, that long! Why didn't anyone tell you that before?

If nothing else, understanding that fussy eating isn't necessarily something that you have caused, and is a natural process that many children go through over a period of time, can really help you cope.

Reality 3: Sneaking the healthy stuff in can help

Grating all manner of vegies into meals and baking of course doesn't necessarily help overcome natural childhood suspicion, but what this does do is three things:

1. It helps your child get more variety and nutrients into their diet
2. It reduces your stress about their nutrition
3. It ensures that, even subtly, your little one is being exposed to different tastes and textures

The funny thing is you may well find, if you have a child who loves to help with the cooking, that they will happily grate a zucchini, mix it into the chocolate cake and still eat it afterwards!

Reality 4: Parents do need to have some say!

We have been told for many years that forcing or coercing a child to eat a food is not advisable. Many health care professionals have been in fear of suggesting anything other than, 'that's fine just go with it'.

Current research suggests that forcing a child to eat certainly isn't the way to go. On the other hand, if children are left to choose what they wish to eat, innate food preferences, such as those for sweet foods, will make up more of their energy needs than if they are provided with healthy options by parents.

Children need to be encouraged to try new foods and in a number of different ways. So for example, this may include a small taste tester, a lick, a drop on the lip, mixed with different foods, cooked in different ways, offered in other meals, offered in different settings and so on.

Also, mealtimes not only need to be family times, but times without interruption. So turn off the TV, (which also advertises junk food to children) and phones – yes that includes mobile phones!

Ideally, a parenting style that is open but instructive – a food-friendly home where children are encouraged to eat their meals – is most effective in the long term.

Don't forget that actions speak louder than words. Be a good role model, it will pay off, eventually...

Reality 5 - Keep offering, but don't forget children can have food dislikes

When reminded that you should offer a food 10-15 times to improve acceptance, you may have had a good laugh. 'My preschooler has seen broccoli more times and in more ways than I can recall,' you say. In reality, this strategy is often very successful in the case of infants and very young children who are still being exposed to new foods. For example, it's not uncommon for a nine month old to seemingly go off a certain food, but if you keep offering it, but not pushing, most will come back around. You can't assume rejection of a food is a dislike at that age.

But in older children, there are two things to consider. Firstly, they, like us, have food preferences. Now I am not saying because a child rejects a food you should stop offering. What I am pointing out is that there are some foods that a child simply won't like or enjoy, just like us. To this day, the thought of brussels sprouts or offal makes me gag. So, keep in mind that even though you offer often, a child may never accept that food.

Secondly, healthy children rarely starve themselves and in fact are very good at meeting their daily energy needs, even if it isn't in the pattern we would prefer. The trick is to ensure that their needs are met by healthy food, rather than high-fat foods, which have twice the amount of energy per gram. Dinner is generally the most common food battleground. Part of this can be that a child has met most of their energy needs by the end of the day. If you think this might be the case, then dinner can be more of a healthy snack than a substantial meal.

Reality 6 – A time and a place for everything

Trying to keep your child lolly and junk food free once the party-going years hit is almost impossible. Some children, once they

get a taste of sweets or chocolate, can recognise a lolly or chocolate bar at 50 paces. So what can you do?

There is nothing wrong with the odd lamington, just ensure that once you open the dam it is at a trickle. Create associations around foods, that include the time, place and reason. So, a certain treat is associated with just one day and one place. For example:

- Friday ice-cream day at your favourite ice-cream parlour near school, after a long week or term can be a welcome treat.
- Sweets at a party are just part of the occasion, but not something you need to have in the cupboard at home.
- A tiny bit of a good quality juice with your evening meal can help iron absorption as well as quench your child's desire for such drinks (ideally for children 2 years +).
- Smoothies are a great treat, healthy, sweet and you can relax and enjoy some time out at your favourite café together.

Can I make it worse?

There is good evidence that restricting a food simply increases its appeal. Don't use rewards, which can have the reverse effect. Keep meals as pleasant as possible, children can be put off their food when eating becomes stressful. Take it gently: don't rush your child through their meals – it takes up to 20 minutes for the brain to tell the body that it has been sufficiently fed; this will also avoid overeating. Sometimes just going with things can offer up new answers. For example, the problem of that half-eaten dinner: some children will eat their evening meal in two sittings and still follow up with some fruit.

When should I worry?

1. A child may be slim, healthy and growing well which is fine; another child may be overweight, appear to eat little and may need their diet and physical activity reviewed.
2. A healthy child doesn't starve themselves to death from refusing to eat food on occasion.
3. However, if a child is underweight and doesn't appear to be growing well, you should consult a healthcare professional.
4. Significant weight stagnation, gain or loss in a child should be discussed with a healthcare professional.
5. If your child finds lumpy food or chunks of food difficult to deal with, seeing a speech pathologist that has experience in swallowing issues, or a feeding clinic may be helpful.
6. Likewise, if you are still concerned about the health status of a fussy eater, you may wish to discuss your concerns with a doctor, nutritionist, dietician or child health professional.

Given the right environment, most children will spontaneously grow out of this phase in due course. So sit back, breathe easy and have fun with food, it's not just about healthy eating it's about nourishing the body and soul.

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