

Skills for Living Occupational Therapy Advice for: Picky Eaters



What causes children to be picky eaters?

Many children are picky or fussy with food. As long as your child is eating a range of foods from key food groups and developing well, this is a phase that many grow out of.



There are several different reasons behind fussy or picky eating habits. Sometimes difficulties with feeding can relate to touch, taste, smell or co-ordination of a child's body or mouth and tongue movements.

Some children can be sensitive to certain food textures or tastes and you might see the following:

- Avoiding particular texture, temperature, colours, strong flavours/smells
- Prefers familiar "safe" foods
- Difficulty with self-feeding to avoid mess/sticky fingers and faces
- Disliking food touching on the plate
- Preference for dry foods and avoids sauces
- A real anxiety response to food

Other children may:

- Overloading their mouth
- Keep food in the mouth for a long time (pocketing it in their cheeks)
- Want to have lots of crunchy or chewy food and avoid the bland foods (or the opposite)

Some children

- Find it hard to keep food in their mouth
- They may have difficulty with the action of biting and chewing
- They may gag or choke on foods
- They might struggle being able to suck through a straw or drink from a cup

What can we do to help?

Ideas to help at home and at school

<p>Making food fun – keep it light hearted and interesting. It’s not always about eating the food – just being comfortable with it.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teddy bears picnics for younger children • Creative cooking and baking • Make smoothies • Use food in messy play • Play a game with ‘feely bags’ – guess the food you’re touching! • Do a ‘taste/smell and match’ experiment – have a try and match the flavour to the picture • Do science experiments with food
<p>After exploring new foods during play, slowly introduce new tastes at mealtimes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your child see and smell different foods that you eat. Be good role models. • Use a ‘tasting plate’ for the whole family – you can pick from it if you want to • Put different foods on (or near) your child’s plate without expecting them to eat them. Tolerating them on the plate initially can be a big step in itself • At meal times have a “no thank you” plate
<p>Food chaining</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make tiny changes to the type of food offered e.g. McDonald’s Fries → Home Cooked Fries → Chips → Chunky Chips → Croquettes → Mashed Potato • You may only add a few pieces of the new food item at a time <p>This process may take a few weeks/months but be patient</p>
<p>Involve your child in the meal preparation, even if they don’t taste it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give cereal a bath in milk • Make models out of foods e.g. pepper trains, banana boats • Make pizza faces • Incorporate special interests such as favourite characters or colours

<p>Reward even the smallest steps in the right direction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “<i>Touch it, kiss it, lick it</i>” - The first try could be just touching the food with fingers, on another occasion bringing it to the lips and eventually having a lick, before ever considering eating the food fully.
<p>Keep it positive</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on positives • Reward for even tiny positive steps • Involve your child as much as possible. • Find ways to make eating a “you can” experience • Use a reward chart that is kept in a visible spot at home. Each time your child does something well, put a star on the chart. Tell them what their reward will be if they get a star each day. Reward them at the end of the week with a small treat.
<p>Give your child some control</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve meals “family style” by serving the different foods in bowls on the table and allowing each person to help themselves. This gives the child a sense of control and also slows down the pace of the meal. It helps children who become overwhelmed when food is presented to them already served up onto a plate • Don’t force your child to eat new foods • Allow them to pick out new foods of their choice at the supermarket • An older child could see this as an experiment and be a ‘food scientist’, learning about food • Let them make a food diary – record new foods they like – or have tried, as they move on
<p>Think about how and where your child sits to eat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can your child see what is on their plate? • Is the table at elbow height for them? • Are their feet supported/on the floor? • Are there lots of unwanted distractions around them? E.g. TV, people busy with other activities • Can your child hold a knife and fork properly? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ If not, teach cutlery skills: ‘stab- with the fork then ‘saw’ with the knife. • Does your child struggle to sit still long enough to eat? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ If so, consider a more supportive cushion or chair ➢ Keep mealtimes between 10 and 30 minutes maximum. If it hasn’t been eaten by then, move on.

<p>Build up trust</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't be tempted to hide or conceal food. Children need to trust you and know that they are safe with the foods that they are eating.
<p>Stick to a predictable routine</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have <u>3 meals a day</u> at set times and eat with your children at the dining table if possible • Space meal times 2.5 – 3 hours apart and avoid allowing snacks in between. Many children don't feel hunger or build up an appetite as they graze and snack during the day.
<p>Increase your child's awareness of their mouth and tongue</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try some of these activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Blowing through a straw, party blower or party whistle ➢ Blowing bubbles ➢ Sucking drinks through a curly or clear straw. Try thicker liquids too such as milkshakes or smoothies to build up skills ➢ Massage the cheeks, puff out the cheeks ➢ Mouth noises – smacking the lips together, clicking / clacking the tongue; singing la la la, ma ma ma, ka ka ka ➢ Count the teeth by touching them with the tongue inside the mouth ➢ Make silly faces – stretching / pouting the lips and moving the tongue to do so
<p>Consider ways of calming/coping before/during eating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try some calm down activities before meal times: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Wearing a weighted lap pad or shoulder wrap • Always put something familiar on your child's plate • Consider a partitioned plate for children who prefer to have their food separated • Offer new foods in a separate bowl to allow the child to serve themselves • Have a drink available on the table at all times • Have a napkin available for the child to use without a fuss



bsites and Online Links for more information

Your Kids Table	https://yourkidstable.com This website has a wealth of resources and information to help parents and children with eating issues
Your Kids OT	www.yourkidsot.com
Pinterest	www.pinterest.com search 'fussy eaters' 'picky eaters' 'sensory feeding' or 'oral motor activities and games'
OT Mom	http://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/dealing-with-picky-eaters.html
The Inspired Treehouse	https://www.sensorysmarts.com/picky_eating.html
Sensory Smarts	https://www.sensorysmarts.com/picky_eating.html
OT Plan	https://www.otplan.com/articles/strategies-to-improve-feeding-at-home.aspx