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A Psychological Guide for Families: Feeding & Eating

Child & Family Psychology and Therapies Service

Introduction

This booklet is part of a series that has been written by Clinical Child Psychologists from the Child and Family Psychology Service. Many parents and carers experience some concerns about their children and at times look outside of their family for extra advice or suggestions.

This booklet has been written to help you understand your child's eating/feeding difficulties. You can use this booklet as a guide to help understand and change your child's eating habits. Choose the ideas that fit for your family. We hope that it will add some ideas to the things that you are already doing and help make your mealtimes better.

Problems with food are fairly common – try not to panic.

Many parents experience problems around meal times with their children. Many children go through phases of refusing to eat, being 'fussy' eaters, or having other eating problems. This is often a normal part of growing up. It can be your child's way of showing independence. However, it can leave parents feeling worried and frustrated.

After the first year, children are actually programmed to refuse or spit out foods. This is because children generally become more mobile at this time and so are able to find and pick up foods without an adult's help. The instinct to spit out food protects your child from eating harmful or poisonous foods that they might have picked up on their travels!

These behaviours rarely last long. A lot of these problems go away in time without your child needing to see a health professional.

Usually children will eat the amount of food their body needs. If your child has a small appetite then they may just be efficient in the way their body uses calories.

Mealtimes are different for every family – your child's eating habits are only a problem if:-

- It is causing you or your child upset or worry.
- They are not eating enough or the right foods to keep them healthy.

This booklet has some simple ideas to help you understand your child's eating problems and make some changes.

Identifying the Problem

The first step is to identify the problem. Keep a diary for at least a week. Record what happens over the 24 hours of each day.

It may be useful to observe and record the following;

- How much is my child eating and drinking in 24 hours?
- What kind of snacks does my child have in between meal times?
- What food is my child eating and drinking? (And what are they not eating and drinking?)
- Does my child get more attention by refusing to eat than by eating what is on offer?
- Do we have a mealtime routine (e.g. all sitting around the table together)?
- Are there any distractions I could stop? (E.g. is the TV on? Are brothers and sisters arguing?)
- How is my child feeling? (E.g. does your child look worried, angry, upset?)
- How do I respond when my child does not eat?
- Are there any physical difficulties (e.g. choking)?
- What is my child doing in the build up to mealtimes and afterwards?

Some reasons why children might refuse to eat

Selective Eating (also known as picky or fussy eating)

Your child might be fussy about the range of foods that they will eat and may not want to try new foods. Children can sometimes dislike certain textures, tastes or smells. Keep a note of foods accepted or rejected to see if there is a pattern. It may simply be a 'food fad' which can affect all children.

Fussy eating doesn't always mean that your child is underweight or that your child is unhealthy. Your child could be a very fussy eater and still take in enough calories and nutrition to be healthy and grow.

Sometimes fussy eating can begin after a period of normal eating. However, many children who develop fussy eating have a history of early feeding difficulties, or anxiety. Children who do not manage to try a wide variety of tastes and textures at an early age are more likely to be fussy eaters.

Food phobias

Phobias are fears that lead a person to avoid the thing they fear. Phobias involving food are common, especially in school aged children. A food phobia can occur on its own or as part of a more general anxiety problem.

There are different sorts of food phobias. Some children have a fear of being sick when they eat. Some children worry that food is bad or harmful in some way. Another common phobia is a fear about choking or not being able to swallow.

Physical problems that affect eating/feeding in infants

Some children have a physical problem that makes it difficult for them to eat. If this is the case, you may notice your child has difficulty sucking, chewing, or biting. You may notice your child is sick or chokes during meals, or suffers from pain or constipation. Your GP can help if you think your child has a physical problem that makes it difficult for them to eat.

Parents' Expectations

There can be a mismatch between what you would like your child to eat, and what your child actually needs to eat.

Your child may have a small appetite. This means that your child only eats very small amounts of food at mealtimes. All children have different appetites. Your child may eat less than other children of their age group and still take in enough calories and vitamins to be healthy and grow. Your GP, health visitor, or school health nurse will be able to tell you how much food your child needs as well as what range of foods they need for a balanced diet.

Other possible reasons why children might have difficulty at mealtimes

- Not liking the feeling of cutlery in their mouth. For example, metal knives and forks are more likely to be disliked.
- Some children like to see the food presented on the plates in a certain order and don't like their food being mashed together.
- Seeing too much food on a plate can be overwhelming. It can be better to only offer a little food at first and add more if wanted.
- Lots of noise or distractions (e.g. other family members or the television).
- Particular smells (or strong smells) of food.

What could you do differently?

Think about the following questions to give yourself some clues about what you could do differently at mealtimes.

- Are there any distractions around to prevent your child from concentrating on his/her food?
- Is your child getting lots of attention for not eating?

- What could you and others do or say to let your child know that you are pleased when they show an interest and eat their food?
- What could you and others do instead of giving attention to your child when he or she doesn't eat?
- Is your child under a lot of pressure to eat – this can increase anxiety and therefore reduce appetite.

What can you do to help?

Be good to yourself and stay calm!

- Parent(s) can feel guilty and blame themselves for their child's eating difficulties. Try to concentrate on what you can do now and in the future. Do not blame yourself for things you think you should have done differently in the past.
- Make sure that all the adults in your child's life support your approach to mealtimes. If you disagree with your partner's approach, discuss it at a time when your child is not there.

How do you feel at mealtimes?

If you are feeling stressed or worried your child may pick up on this. Look after yourself so that you are then able to help your child feel relaxed and confident around food.

Encouragement and Praise

- Encourage your child to try new foods from your plate. Children learn to eat new foods by tasting them first. They like to 'copy' adults and other children. Offer your child new foods but don't force them. Allow them to spit food out again if they don't like it. You can always try again another time. Introduce new foods slowly and in small quantities. Even if they don't try the food, seeing food can help it become more familiar.

- Make sure you give your child lots of praise for positive behaviours (e.g. sitting still). It is important that they get much more of your attention for eating and trying foods than for not eating!
- Double the impact of the praise by getting as many family members to praise as possible. You can also praise your child in front of other adults. Young children often like to please adults. When they see you are pleased with something they have done, they are more likely to want to do it again.
- Praise immediately and be clear about what has pleased you.
- When praising, show enthusiasm by adding eye contact, a smile and/or a hug.
- Avoid combining praise with put downs. Try not to remind your child of past failures.
- Never try to force your child to eat. This may make your child more worried about mealtimes.
- When offering your child a new food, they may need to try it as many as 17 times before they like it. Remember that there are some tastes that adults have to get used to – Many adults don't like coffee, olives, or alcohol the first time they taste it! It is only after tasting it several times that we learn to like it.

Don't try to coax or bribe your child to eat. When the meal is over you can reward your child for the things they have done well. Don't punish your child for not eating – this only makes mealtimes stressful for everyone.

Environment and Routine

- Make sure there is nothing more interesting going on around you at mealtimes that is likely to distract your child.
- Present food in fun ways – e.g. on colourful plates, or cut in to fun shapes.
- Try to set up a routine by having meals at a regular time and deciding on a place for the child to sit.
- Make mealtimes an enjoyable social occasion. Sit at a table together as a family and use brightly coloured plates and cups that your child will enjoy. Family members are important in setting a good example of healthy eating behaviour.
- Your child may be a slow eater so do not rush a meal. However, try to limit mealtimes to 30 minutes.
- Make sure mealtimes are as relaxed as possible. Like adults, children find it difficult to eat when the atmosphere is tense. A good example is a buffet at a party. The variety of food available coupled with the relaxing atmosphere tends to encourage us to eat more than we normally would.
- Get your child involved in preparing, cooking and tasting the food before it is served at the table.
- Only give your child an amount of food that they are likely to be able to eat – you can always give more if they want some.
- Cut out sugary foods and drinks – these tend to fill children up but don't contain much goodness.
- Limit snacks during the day so your child does not feel full up before mealtimes.

Mealtimes can be fun! – If you are playful in the way you introduce a new food to your child, it will help reduce their worry. Play with your child and enjoy pretend cooking and pretend mealtimes to help them feel more relaxed around food and eating.

Who will support you whilst you are making these changes?

When making a plan to help change your child's eating habits include anyone who helps care for your child. This may be your partner, grandparents or even your health visitor for example. When you are making a plan to help change your child's eating habits, it is important that everyone who cares for your child during mealtimes is taking the same approach. Try not to make lots of changes all at once as this could be very confusing for your child.

How to maintain your efforts when things are going well

- Support from family and friends.
- If you have a health visitor he/she should be able to support you with some of these ideas.
- Keep a diary so you can notice progress; steps can be small.
- Change can sometimes take time.
- If this doesn't work then please contact your General Practitioner.

When to seek the advice of a Health Professional

If the problem shows no sign of improving, or if you are worried about your child's weight, growth, or health you should contact your General Practitioner for further advice.

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

Please let us know what you think about this booklet

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	1	2	3	4	5	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful

3. What might you do differently now that you have read this booklet? _____

4. Please tick the box and give us your address if you would like to receive another booklet from our range.

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Do you have any other ideas for booklets? _____

Your name and address _____

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Please return to
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