

Picky Eaters

Handout 4: Practical strategies

DISCLAIMER: *These handouts have been produced for children who are having difficulty in eating a range of foods. It is expected that any strategies used within these leaflet are adapted to individual children and that any queries are discussed with a relevant health professional for that child prior to being tried. This information is not for children who have any physical reason that makes eating difficult.*

This handout focuses on the practical things you can do to help your child. There are lots of different ideas to try. We suggest identifying a goal you want to work on, make this small enough and manageable, and then pick out a few key strategies to try.

Remember, never force a child to eat. This will make the problem worse. If you are concerned about your child's health as a result of them not eating, contact your GP.

Division of Responsibility

Ellyn Satter, a dietitian, refers to the 'Division of Responsibility'. This states that your job as a parent is to decide *when, where and what* foods are provided, and your child's job is to choose *how much* and *whether* to eat. This means children are in control of what they put in their mouths. See Handout 3: 'What and how children eat' if you are worried about what that means for your child's diet.

Positive communication

It is important that eating times are kept positive. If mealtimes are stressful and unpleasant for you, your child will be likely to pick up on that quickly and feel the same way.

Some things to remember:

- Give attention for good progress with specific praise, 'you touched the stick!' (Stick could be a carrot or cucumber stick, by not labelling the food this can help children stay calmer).
- Smiley happy face! If you are making a 'oh no he's not going to like that' or 'yuck I wouldn't eat that' face, your child will read that and respond accordingly.
- Don't ask a question that can be answered with a no – e.g. the difference between 'can you try a bit of that?' and 'you can try a bit of that'. Try to state positives like 'you can' without forcing the child to do anything. We want children to know we believe in them – asking 'can you' implies that there is some uncertainty about whether they are able to.
- Don't use food in a good food/ bad food way – if we use dessert as a reward for eating vegetables, vegetables become bad and dessert becomes good.
- Stress suppresses appetite – if children become stressed at mealtimes, they can end up eating less. Try to keep mealtimes happy, take the pressure off your child to eat and let them explore foods.

- Positive language – instead of ‘don’t throw the food’, you can use ‘food stays on the table’. This teaches what you want your child to do, instead of what they shouldn’t do.

Food fun

Try playing with food! Do this away from feeding times and play with your child so that they see you are happy to have food on your hands and get in a mess.

Make sure the foods you use are edible and an appropriate texture for your child to eat. You don’t want to have to take the food away from their mouths if they get brave and try some. Positive praise throughout – the aim is not to eat but explore. All behaviour around interacting with the food can be praised.

Mirror what your child does and you can try using the ‘Cherry on the top’ section to model a step that is just a little bit harder than what your child is doing. For example, if they poke the food, you could poke the food then squash it a little bit with your finger.

‘Dry’ food play

Many children don’t like sticky/slimy foods. Dry textures of food play are a good starting point if you think your child might not like the wetter textures.

Try:

- Crushing up wheat biscuits e.g. Weetabix, or hoop cereals e.g. Cheerios and Weetos. with hands
- Running fingers through dry porridge oats. If your child will tolerate it, grated cheese could be used.
- Add food colouring and mix it into the food with your hands.
- Hide motivating items in a box of crushed up wheat biscuit cereal or oats. Ideally these items should be small items of wrapped food that the child likes, but small plastic toys can be used if this is more motivating.
- Thread potato ring savoury snacks onto a sweet lace to make a bracelet, necklace
- Cut sliced bread with cookie cutters
- Roll orange/lemons along the floor to each other. If you are on a mat score the skin to allow smell to stimulate senses but this can get sticky so avoid doing this on the carpet.

‘Wet’ food play

Progress to more sticky activities such as:

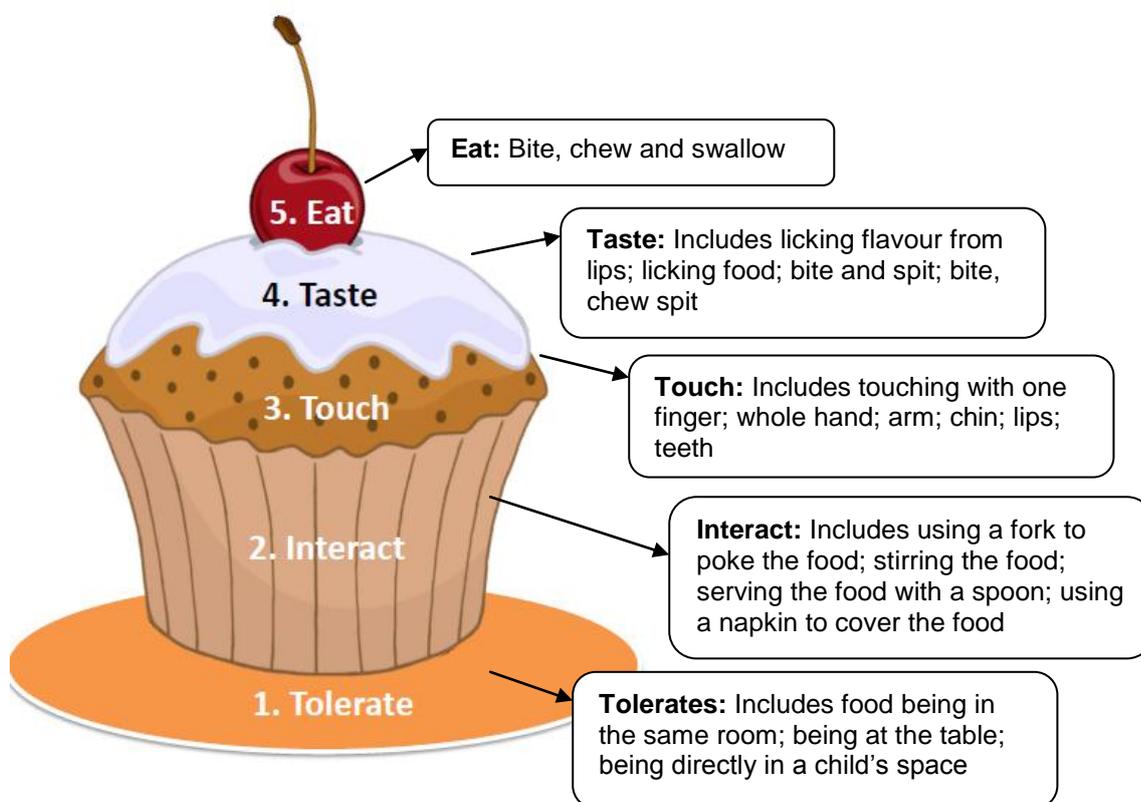
- Run fingers through cooked pasta
- Pour water or milk onto wheat biscuit cereal, porridge oats
- Mix icing sugar and water – add food colouring
- Chop up jelly – try different colours and hide toys in it
- Spread cream cheese onto oatcakes, crackers
- Hide treats or toys in angel delight
- Mash soft butter/cooked apples with a fork
- Potato & vegetables prints (carrot, broccoli) – use ketchup/jam as paint
- Finger painting with yoghurt – add food colouring
- Coloured ice cubes – prepare with fruit e.g. raspberries, blueberries in the middle

If children struggle to touch messier textures – encourage them to try it but using something like a wooden spoon, pastry brush or fork. Make sure you are in an area of your home that you are comfortable with getting messy – it is important you are relaxed for these activities. A cheap shower curtain can be an excellent messy play mat!

Cherry on the top – How to move towards eating

For most children, eating is a simple enough task and asking them to try and eat something new is not a big problem. However, if you have a child who is a picky eater and becomes stressed around trying new foods, it is important to grade how this is done.

For this, we can think of ‘eating’ as the ‘cherry on the top’ but before we get to that point, we need to look at the foundations. All steps towards this should be praised – don’t rush towards eating.



For each individual food, you may want to work out where your child is with the food – are they tolerating, interacting, touching, tasting or eating the food? If they aren’t yet able to interact with it, asking them to eat it is likely to be unsuccessful. Find where your child is and take it slowly from there. This process is not quick – you would very rarely go from tolerating to eating something in one sitting if you are a picky eater. It is more likely that for each food this process takes months. This is OK.

An example would be a child who can’t tolerate a carrot being on their plate. The food fun section has ideas on how to play with food, and these principles can be applied here. It may be the child can’t tolerate the carrot on their plate but would be able to cope with putting a napkin over it. Eventually, they could maybe pass the plate to someone else or pass the carrot whilst it is wrapped in a napkin.

Learning plate

A learning plate can be a useful tool – this is for use during mealtimes. When a child can’t tolerate a food on their plate they can have a ‘learning plate’ next to their dinner plate. The learning plate has food on it that your child is learning about but not eating. They can do what they want to this food (within reason!) including touch, poke, squash or sniff but there is **no pressure to eat** any of this food. In time, they may be brave enough to lick a little bit from their finger. It is important that you as their parent or carer are there to model behaviour a little bit above where they are in a positive way. If your child is touching a food, praise them – don’t use the food name if you think this may make your child worried, e.g. for a carrot ‘you touched the orange stick!’ and then show

them they could touch the carrot to their hand. In time this can progress to touching it to their chin then lips then teeth.

Top tips

- Go steady – don't force your child to eat. This will make the problem worse. Equally – don't try to feed mouthfuls when your child isn't paying attention, e.g. yawning, laughing, looking away. This can make children scared around food.
- Encourage independence – if your child can physically feed themselves, then this is what should be encouraged. Your child is then in control of how much and at what pace they eat. Generally, we all feel more relaxed when we have control – the same goes for your child and feeding. Giving them the control is important.
- Family meals – eat around your child, even if you are having different food. Ideally, eat at a table, have the same food and encourage self-serving dishes in the middle.
- Get seating right – children need their feet supported, hips and knees at 90 degrees and table in between chest and tummy button height. Watch your child – are they tucking their feet under them or kicking out, propping their feet on the table or chair legs? Make sure there is somewhere high enough for their feet to reach – foot stools can be made out of catalogues gaffa taped together!
- Discourage iPads, TVs, etc. at mealtimes.
- Play! Don't discourage touching food; encourage it! Our fingers will give our brains information about what the teeth need to do to cope with that food.
- Division of responsibility (see section in this handout).
- Take foods out of packaging if your child is cued in to how things look visually. This prevents meltdowns when companies 'rebrand' their products and also allows your child to explore the food at face value, rather than judge it on whether the packaging is attractive or not. Tupperware and sandwich bags are helpful here.
- Touching is important! Getting messy hands and face is great and good learning for food. Do not wipe a child's face and hands whilst at the table if they don't like this – they will associate the table with uncomfortable touch sensation. If we crunch, squash or touch foods with our fingers, our brain has more information about what it would feel like in our mouths and we are more likely to try it eventually than if we have never touched it.
- Copy what your child does with their food and then model something a little bit harder (e.g. if they poke it with one finger, copy that then squash the food. If they copy, then you can do that, if they look upset, take it back a step to poking the food again.
- A useful rule is 'you can only say you don't like a food when you have tried it 15 times. If you haven't, you can say you are learning about that food'. For some children, having a chart of 15 tries for a specific food and ticking off each time can be helpful. This has to be on 15 separate occasions.

What to do next

Try reading the relevant handouts:

- Picky Eating Handout 1: Introduction
- Picky Eating Handout 2: How and what children eat
- Picky Eating Handout 3: Sensory issues

If you try strategies consistently in these handouts without any success, please discuss your concerns with your child's GP, health visitor or paediatrician. They will be able to refer on to relevant professionals if they feel the level of need is significant.

At present, the NHS provides support for children who are picky eaters that have a physical oral development difficulty, concerns around the safety of their swallow or not gaining weight or growing. If children have none of these issues but continue to be picky eaters, there is no NHS funded service to support picky eating.

Further Reading

Ellyn Satter Institute - <http://ellynsatterinstitute.org/htf/howtofeed.php>

Range of Ellyn Satter's books such as 'Child of Mine: Feeding your child with love and good sense'.

References

Toomey, K.A. 2010. Picky Eaters vs. Problem Feeders: The SOS Approach to Feeding.

Satter, E. 2000. *Child of Mine: Feeding your child with love and good sense*. Bull Publishing.

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