

# Fussy eaters? Helpful ways to encourage children to eat healthy diets

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Parents play an extremely important role in helping their children develop food preferences, but attempts to encourage young children to eat a more healthy diet may actually be having the opposite effect, according to a review published in the *International Journal of Obesity*.

Many children become fussy eaters around the age of 18-24 months, forming the start of a long term battle with food for many parents. Toddlers who were once happy to eat a wide range of foods, including fruits and vegetables, may start to refuse to eat particular foods. Others who were quite open minded about new tastes and flavours may start to become neophobic (afraid of new foods). Such behaviour can be extremely trying and stressful for parents, leading them to resort to all manner of ways to encourage children to eat a healthy diet. However, such good intentions may not always have the desired approach according to the review's author, leading psychologist, Professor David Benton of the University of Wales Swansea.

Professor Benton urges parents not to worry about children's fear of new foods. "It's a completely normal response" he explains. "It's a survival mechanism. Once children start walking, neophobia discourages them from eating foods which may be poisonous. It doesn't mean that your child is a poor eater. Thankfully it's something that most children grow out of with time, but it is a big problem for parents trying to get children to try and accept new foods".

But Professor Benton also cautions against restricting foods or offering

them as a reward. “Restricting access to particular foods increases preference for that food, rather than decreasing it. On the other hand, don’t force your child to eat a food; they will only resist and that will decrease their liking of that food”. Furthermore, offering foods as a reward for good behaviour such as eating vegetables may not have the intended consequences. “Offering desserts as a reward for eating greens, or some other ‘distasteful’ food, makes the reward food more desirable to your child and the food you are trying to encourage them to eat, less desirable. This makes encouraging your child to eat a healthy balanced diet even more difficult”.

The report also highlights the sensitive and important role that parents can play in helping children to develop healthy eating habits. “Whilst we are built and born with certain likes and dislikes (2), food preferences can be modified by experience during early childhood. Parents, brothers, sisters and other role models such as teachers, can all help shape a child’s food preferences and can be useful for encouraging children to develop preferences for a healthy and balanced diet”.

But it isn’t always plain sailing encouraging children to eat a balanced diet and try new foods. Professor Benton advises parents to “be patient when it comes to getting your child to try new foods, although this may be easier said than done. The more your child is exposed to a food, the more likely they are to try it. It takes approximately 11 times for a child to try a new food, although it can be as many as nearly 90 times! Refusal of new foods is common when children move from a liquid to a solid diet”.

“Children are more likely to accept a new food if they see their parents or older siblings eating and enjoying that food. If your child sees you eating vegetables, and they think it tastes good, they are more likely to follow suit in the future than if they didn’t see you eating them”.

Professor Benton, having reviewed the scientific literature in the area, has come up with the following advice for parents wishing to encourage healthy eating and children to try new foods:

- Make mealtimes fun! The emotional atmosphere at mealtimes is important. Don't use meal times as an opportunity to chastise and don't let a child's failure to eat cause unpleasantness.
- Make the most of role models. Siblings, peers and parents can act as role models to encourage the tasting of new foods.
- Expose your child to a range of foods, tastes and textures early on.
- Keep trying new foods. Repeated exposure to initially disliked foods can breakdown resistance.
- Don't restrict access to particular foods. This has the effect of increasing, rather than decreasing, preference for, and consumption, of that food.
- Don't force your child to eat a particular food. Doing so will decrease the liking of that food. Neophobia is to be expected and should not be allowed to generate negativity.
- Don't use high energy foods as rewards and treats for eating their greens. It's unlikely to encourage your child to eat the food you want them to eat. Use rewards such as a trip to the swimming pool or the cinema instead.

Source: The Sugar Bureau

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