

Study finds some mealtime strategies make fussy kids even fussier

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New research has found that mealtime strategies used by parents of fussy eaters might be inadvertently turning their children into even fussier eaters, interrupting their ability to regulate their own appetite and

establish healthy eating habits. The research is published in the journal *Appetite*.

The research team from Deakin University's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition IPAN found parents with very fussy children often used pressure and persuasion to encourage their children to eat and these [strategies](#) have been shown to be least effective in developing [healthy eating habits](#) and behaviors.

Lead researcher, Dr. Alissa Burnett said parents with less fussy children were more likely to encourage healthier eating habits by involving their children in meal preparation and not forcing them to eat.

"The findings tell us that we need to be doing more to help parents of fussy eaters because the strategies they are instinctively using, while well intentioned, are not helping their children develop lifelong healthy eating behaviors," Dr. Burnett said.

"It can be very frustrating when children refuse to eat or refuse to eat certain foods and we start to worry the child will be hungry or is not getting adequate nutrition, so providing well-targeted advice is important."

The qualitative comparison of mothers' feeding strategies involved a survey of more than 1,500 mothers of children aged between 2 and 5 and assessed child fussiness levels using the Children's Eating Behavior Questionnaire. The mothers were also asked the open-ended question "What are the strategies you use when your child is being fussy or refusing to eat?"

Dr. Burnett said the responses described strategies that may inadvertently reinforce fussiness, promote poor appetite self-regulation or poor dietary intake including:

- I tell them they only have to eat, for example, five mouthfuls of their meal.
- I tell them that is what's for dinner; if they don't eat it, they will go to bed hungry.
- I tell him, if he eats his dinner he can have dessert, or do an activity he likes.

Parents whose children were less fussy tended to involve their children in meal preparation, let their child to decide when they were full, and serve certain foods repeatedly to encourage their children to try foods they thought they wouldn't like. Responses from these parents included:

- I involve him in the shopping for food and in the preparation of meals.
- I don't force her to eat if she doesn't want to. I let her decide how much and how often she would like to eat.
- I always provide some options that I know they will like, combined with some other things that I want to expose them to.

Dr. Burnett said [parents](#) of very fussy children were more likely to deconstruct meals, serving pasta and sauce separately, or hide vegetables in meals to get their children to eat more healthy foods.

"Presenting foods in unusual forms or hiding certain ingredients, such as vegetables, might improve [dietary intake](#) in the short-term but doesn't teach [children](#) to accept a variety of foods in the longer term," Dr. Burnett said.

More information: Alissa J. Burnett et al, Mothers' descriptions of their feeding strategies in response to fussy eating with children of different levels of trait fussiness, *Appetite* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2023.106581](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.106581)

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