



Tips for Happier Meal Times

Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Information

Children with restricted eating patterns need experiences with their non-preferred foods in a fun playful way. Children are usually happy with the limited range of foods they are eating. We cannot force them to eat non-preferred foods, try to make them feel bad or guilty, or get cross with them for not eating. This does not work. The overall goal for children with eating difficulties is to create positive normal, healthy eating patterns through:



General meal time tips

- Offer 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks every 2½ to 3 hours during the daytime (breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and supper).
- At every main meal, offer a variety of foods.
- Offer sweet tastes at the end of a meal, as sweet tastes suppress the appetite more rapidly than any other tastes.
- Dessert is not a reward for eating.
- Keep distractions during the meals to a minimum. Avoid TVs, devices or having toys at the table or within view. Have only food related items in front of the child. Allowing your child to interact with food in a playful way helps keep a positive focus on food.
- If your child is getting bored or inattentive at a meal, re-engage them by offering a small amount of a new food (or a previously presented food).
- Do not force feed your child.
- Up to 2 years of age it's okay to co-feed as long as the child doesn't fight it. This is when you both have a spoon to feed.

Structure

Have a routine to meal times, eat in the same room, at the same table. Repetition helps learning as knowing what to expect makes meals less scary for children. Ideally eat together as a family allowing your child to feed themselves (if able), for at least the first 10 minutes of the meal.

Keep meal times to no more than 20 to 30 minutes.

If your child has not eaten enough of the meal in the first 10 minutes, you can assist your child to eat. You can each have a spoon or fork. Do this in a playful manner; don't push.

Offer drinks half way through and at end of a meal so your child doesn't fill up on these.

Make foods manageable

Prepare foods in a way your child can manage. This might be pureed or small, easy to chew bites, or easy to hold strips. Never leave a child unattended when eating.

Modelling

Children learn through watching you eat. Enjoy your meals with your children, at a table if possible. Make this a positive time when good things are talked about. Stress at mealtimes reduces appetite and reduces the enjoyment associated with healthy food, so try to keep things fun.

If your child does not eat the same food as you, put a small amount of their food on your plate, and a little bit of your food on their plate (or a learning plate next to their plate). They can then explore this food without the pressure to eat it.

Learning about food

Children learn about food through exploration and play. Explore the food with your child using all the senses, starting with looking, then smelling and touching. If your child is feeling brave they may even get to taste the food.

Talk about:

- how the food looks (wet, dry, bumpy etc)
- what it feels like when you touch it ...
 - bumpy, or smooth?
 - sticky or squishy?
 - does it crush into powder?
- how it smells (eg. sweet, salty, fresh)
- how it feels on your tongue
- whether it makes a crunchy sound when you bite it

You can use exaggerated mouth movements to “show and tell” your child about how food works in the mouth and how our teeth work to break up food. Caregivers need to be good role models for their children. Model chewing and eating a variety of foods. When children are learning about foods the focus is on developing skills and enjoying the experience.

Language around food

Children often find new foods overwhelming and are easily discouraged. It is important to encourage all their brave exploring with non-preferred foods, and not make eating the foods the only focus.

Celebrate interactions like touching, smelling, licking, biting and spitting out, holding in the mouth before spitting out, chewing and spitting out. These are all chances to praise your child and make them feel good about themselves as FOOD EXPLORERS.

If your child says a food is *disgusting* (or another similar word meaning the same thing), you should respond with something like “You’re still learning about that food” or “You’re still learning about that big taste.”

DO language tells your child the behaviour you would like them to do

For example:

- Replace “Stop throwing” with, “Food stays on the table. If you don’t want it, put it up here.”
- Replace “Sit down!” with, “Chairs are for sitting on.”

YOU CAN language

Encourage your child with positive prompts: “YOU CAN...” rather than questions “Can you...?”

YOU CAN statements say “I believe in you” and give less opportunity for saying no.

For example:

- “Can you try your peas” becomes “You can try the peas.”

Preventing your child burning out on their preferred foods

When a child eats the same food prepared and presented in the same way every day or every meal, this can cause them to 'burn out' and stop eating that food. This is very concerning if your child does not have many foods in their diet.

The best way to prevent losing foods usually eaten is to offer a food every second day, rather than every day.

You can also make changes to a preferred food every time it is presented within a 48 hour period.

For example changing the:

- size
- shape: eg. use cookie cutters to change shape of toast or sandwiches; use different sized bowls for serving
- colour: eg. use different coloured plates or cutlery for serving; add a drop of food colouring in yoghurt or pasta
- texture: eg. add hundreds and thousands or real fruit bits like mashed banana to yoghurt; try baking a crumbed food instead of frying.
- taste: eg. add a tiny bit of sauce, garlic powder, herbs or spices
- temperature

each time the child is given their preferred food. Change should be large enough to be noticed, but small enough for the child to still eat the food.

Hiding foods within preferred foods may cause your child to lose this food and/or lose trust in foods you offer.

Postural stability

Having your child's body well supported helps their muscles have more control for eating.

- Use a non-slip mat under your child's bottom
- Have a foot rest
- Use side supports if needed
- Knees should be over the edge of the chair
- The correct table height is halfway between your child's belly button and chest level

Notes



For more information about:

hospital and specialist services, go to www.cdhb.health.nz | your health and medication, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz