

How to cope with feeding a fussy toddler

It can be very frustrating for parents when their child won't eat. We hear a lot about overeating, but what's behind the child who won't eat or won't eat enough?

As long as your child is growing normally, he/she is probably ok, even if your child doesn't seem to be eating as much as you think they should. It's quite common for children this age to have trouble sitting still for meals, to eat irregularly, and to be very picky about what they will eat.

You may be tempted to try to force your child to eat more, or change the food choice if they do not like what you have served but try to refrain from this. The more pressure you put on, the more your child will resist and the less they will eat. Instead, offer a range of healthy foods and role model eating them yourself so you're setting a good example, then sit back and let your child choose what they want to eat, and how much.

It is also important not to pile too much food on to your child's plate as this can be daunting for some children who are not confident eaters. Small portions can encourage children to eat. If your child is still hungry afterwards they can always have seconds.

The important thing to remember is that normal growth is the best indicator of adequate nutrition, so if your child is maintaining adequate growth in both height and weight (which your health visitor or GP can help you determine), then your child is having enough food even if you would like them to eat more. Talk to your child's GP if you're really concerned to confirm that your child is growing at the expected rate.

While your child may be getting enough calories to grow, you may be worried that they are not getting these calories from the right sources. Try to record what your child eats for about a week (without making a big deal about it in front of him/her). You'll probably find that they are eating better than you thought. If your child seems deficient in any one food group, try offering more foods from that group for a while. If that doesn't work, you can always ask your doctor to recommend an appropriate multivitamin to help meet your child's nutritional needs.

Around age two or three, toddler's growth slows down, and their appetite follows. It's no coincidence that this is right around the time that picky eating begins. This goes for school children too, they are steady growers and their appetite stays fairly steady.

It's normal for toddlers to be picky eaters as this phase is part of the developmental phase nearly all children pass through. Adults can make this a tougher phase by nagging children to eat, bribing them with dessert, or taking away privileges (or food) if they don't eat.

Research shows that children who are pushed to taste food or take another bite may eat less well and less healthfully. Or they may do the opposite, and eat really well, beyond their appetite, and perhaps too much. For children who are in the picky eating phase, pressuring them may shut down their appetite, causing early fullness.

Some children don't eat well with food allergy, especially if they have multiple food allergies. With potentially many food restrictions and diet limitations, these children may be bored with their daily diet and eat less well.

Some children have an enhanced sense of taste which can result in selective eating, especially of vegetables.

Some children may dislike certain textures, like mushy, wet or slippery foods, and avoid them. Others may be sensitive to the appearance or smell of food. Sensitivities to food can limit the diet, leading to poor eating and nutrition.

When children fill up on snacks, they simultaneously fill up their bellies. This can easily lead to eating poorly at meals.

Children are easily distracted by TV or toys at the table, and this ultimately may have a negative impact on eating.

At the end of a long day, some children are simply too tired to eat. This may be true with the young athlete and the toddler, or the child who has had a busy day of events and school. The good news is that most children are good at making up the difference in their food consumption when one meal is less than stellar, meaning they will eat more at the next meal or snack.

When children are sick they tend to eat less well, mainly due to reduced appetite. This is generally not a worry, as the appetite comes back when children start to feel better. Preventing dehydration is the most important aspect of managing illness in the child.

If you have any concerns about the growth, nutrition or development of your child do not hesitate to get in touch with your GP or Health Visitor.

(Information taken from the NHS website and The Baby Centre)

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