

Managing Mealtimes

A parent's guide to stress-free feeding

Family mealtimes are an important time for the development of a child's social skills and normal feeding patterns, and so should be a time free from screens and distractions. Mealtimes can, however, become disrupted due to fussy eating behaviours, sibling disagreements, limited attention spans or simply everyone being on different schedules.

Here are 6 strategies to help manage the most common problems that you may experience at your mealtimes.

1. MANAGING YOUR CHILD/REN'S ANXIETY

Strange as it sounds, sitting down to eat, whether at home or at a restaurant, can be stressful for children! Things that may help to manage this include:

- Setting out mealtime structure by either explaining the expectations or having a visual reminder so they know what is coming next (e.g. washing hands, set up, sitting on chairs, talking and listening to each other, pack up).
- Allow your child to have downtime doing something that relaxes them immediately before a mealtime.
- If you are going out to eat and you know this may cause stress, think about showing them the menu and letting them choose a couple of options before you go.



2. BEING AWARE OF SENSORY TRIGGERS



For children who have sensory issues, mealtimes can be very unpredictable. Something not mixed exactly right, the noise of a sibling's chewing or the smell of a food could all be examples of triggers. It can be hard to know what the issue is, so try to take note of the patterns. What was the food? What else was on the table? What was the positioning of the rest of the family? Where were you? How were they sitting? Once you have this information, you can start to form a picture of how to help your child deal with situations where these triggers may arise.

3. HAVING STRUCTURE AND CONSISTENCY AROUND MEALTIMES

Children thrive on predictability and routine. Some examples that will help with this at meal times include:

- Having a clear meal time routine/schedule, and a set meal duration
- Having set seats at the table, serving meals on the same plates, using the same cutlery or having consistent place mats
- Having certain types of foods on certain days e.g. curry on Mondays, fish meals on Tuesdays, beef on Wednesdays etc.
- Giving warning when mealtime routines are going to change e.g. eating out



4. BEING CLEAR ON EVERYONE'S JOB AT A MEAL TIME

The jobs of parents and children at a meal time are different, and it is important to know what they are, in order, to save stress and fights.

The job of a parent is to:

- Decide what foods are going to be cooked and served at a meal
- Determine where the food is going to be served, and at what time

The job of a child is to:

- Decide what, if anything, they eat from the foods that are offered
- If they do eat a food, they decide how much to eat



This means not giving alternative options if your child rejects what you have offered – if they don't want to eat, they don't have to! Children typically eat 5-6 times per day, so there is another chance for them to eat again very soon. Whilst of course it is important that your child is eating enough, children's appetites fluctuate widely – some days they will eat more than you, and on others they will seem to survive on a few crackers! This is normal. Instead, look at how much your child is eating over the course of 1-2 weeks, and try take the pressure off and enjoy the time as a family.

5. FOCUS ON SOMETHING OTHER THAN THE FOOD

Some children have no problem when it comes to snacking, but find family meals overwhelming. This can be made worse by focusing too much on what is (or is not) being eaten. To avoid this, try to focus on other topics of discussion. Some examples include:

- What happened in their day
- What their favourite toys or games are
- Compare colours and shapes of foods they are eating to other things. For example 'your tomatoes are red, what other things can you think of are red?' or 'your broccoli is fluffy at the top, what other things are fluffy?'



6. PICK YOUR BATTLES



It is important to decide what your priorities are at a meal time – it is likely that these will change over time, and will depend on your child and family dynamic. If your focus is that your child eats with the family and learns to sit whilst eating, you may choose to offer foods they are more likely to accept. If you want to increase the range of foods they eat, you may choose to spend more time making those new foods fun, including discussions about their shape, colour, texture and how they sound when they are chewed. Remember that every family is different, and the aim of a family dinner is to create a safe, happy environment for everyone.