



helping your child explore new foods

simple strategies for less stress at mealtimes



ARE YOU FEELING CONCERNED THAT YOUR CHILD ISN'T EATING A VARIETY OF FOODS?

You're not alone! Food refusal or "picky eating" is an incredibly common challenge that many parents face. One in five children have feeding difficulties in the first five years of life, and one in ten will develop more serious challenges with foods.

To some extent, food refusal can be developmentally normal. When a child first tries a new food, it's different than what they're used to. Children's tastes also change as they grow and they may love a food one day but not the next. Like any other milestone, learning to eat a variety of foods is a skill that can develop over time. This handout reviews some strategies that you can use as a parent to help your child learn to enjoy a variety of foods.



Learn About Food Through Play and Exploration

- Include your child in everyday food experiences such as grocery shopping, cooking, setting the table, or pretend play with food.
- Encourage your child to help choose foods at the store, assist with simple meal preparation, or explore new foods alongside you.
- Give your child opportunities to look at, touch, smell, and interact with unfamiliar foods without any expectation to eat them. Using all of their senses helps children become more familiar with new foods and build comfort over time. As they learn, they may lick or briefly place a food in their mouth before taking it out. This is a normal part of food exploration for many children.



Talk About Food with Your Child

- Describe foods using words that focus on their sensory qualities, such as taste, texture, temperature, colour, or smell. For example: crunchy, smooth, juicy, warm, cool, chewy, sweet, or spicy. Try to avoid describing foods as "good," "bad," or whether someone should or shouldn't like them.



Be a Positive Food Role Model

- Pay attention to how your child approaches a new food and follow their lead.
- Let your child see you explore foods using your senses. Look at the food, smell it, touch it, and talk about what you notice.
- Modelling curiosity can help children feel more comfortable trying these behaviours themselves.



Keep Mealtimes Positive

- Make mealtimes about more than just eating. Enjoy the opportunity to connect as a family by talking about your day, sharing stories, and spending time together.
- Let your child know there is no pressure to eat a new food. Encourage them to explore it in whatever way feels comfortable, whether that's looking at it, smelling it, touching it with a utensil or their hands, giving it a lick or taste, or choosing to eat it when they are ready.



Create a Consistent Mealtime Routine

- Aim to offer meals and snacks at regular times each day. Having a predictable routine can help children recognize and respond to their hunger and fullness cues.
- Whenever possible, eat together as a family. Shared mealtimes provide opportunities for children to learn about food by watching others eat and enjoying time together.
- Include a variety of nourishing foods at meals and snacks, along with familiar favourites and opportunities to explore new foods without pressure.



Offer Small Portions

- Start with small portions or use a child-sized plate to keep meals manageable and avoid overwhelming your child.
- Try passing around a dish of food so each person can serve him or herself. Your child may surprise you by taking a new food.
- Serve your child a small amount of food at a time, this gives your child a chance to ask for more.



Respect Your Child's Appetite

- Children are born with the ability to recognize when they are hungry and when they are full. Allowing them to decide whether and how much to eat helps them develop trust in these cues.
- A child who comes to the table hungry is often more interested in exploring and trying foods. Offering meals and snacks on a consistent schedule can help support appetite at mealtimes.

what can get *in the way*?

Some unintentional habits may hinder your child's progress in accepting a variety of foods. Make sure to:

- Create eating breaks: Avoid constant grazing so your child can feel hungry for meals and snacks.
- Remove distractions: Turn off screens to support positive mealtime participation.
- Use neutral food language: Avoid labelling foods as "good" or "bad"; all foods can be enjoyed.
- Avoid pressure to eat: Let your child explore foods at their own pace without forcing bites.
- Reduce mealtime stress: Focus on offering food, not how much your child eats.

Need personalized support?
Everyone's nutrition needs are different.

This handout provides general nutrition information and is not a substitute for individualized medical or nutrition advice. Speak with a **Registered Dietitian** for recommendations tailored to your health needs.

