

HOW TO GET YOUR CHILD TO EAT WHAT YOU SERVE?

Short answer to the above question is – You can't. There is very little we can do to **make** our children eat. However, there is lots we can do to **encourage** healthy eating habits in our children. This is often a long process that requires adults to change the way they view mealtimes and food, but it is very doable.

I decided to dedicate this newsletter to children's eating because this aspect of parenting seems to be pressing so many buttons in so many families. The usual name given to children who don't eat what we give them is "fussy" or "picky" eaters. To address it properly, first we need to understand the "Why". So, what is behind "fussy eating"?

Understanding the "Why"

Some children are "fussy" around food because of **food neophobia** – irrational fear or dislike of any unfamiliar or new foods. All children go through this phase and most grow out of it by the age of 4 or 5. But some seem to be stuck in it for longer.

Some children appear "picky" due to their **genetics** - we are biologically programmed to favour sweet and savoury tastes and to dislike sour and bitter ones because most poisonous substances are bitter in taste. However, some safe foods also have bitter taste (cabbage, kale, Brussel sprouts and broccoli) which gives us parents a lot of grief!

Some children have challenging eating habits because of their **sensory** preferences. This is because some foods cause sensory overload. Sensitivities are most linked to food textures but they can be triggered by flavour and smell too. If children struggle with sensory eating, some types of food will cause both physical and mental discomfort and pain if pushed to it eat them.

Some children appear "fussy" but are just doing what their ancestors had done for a long time. This is called **evolutionary eating** - because of our hunter lifestyle in the past, we ate a lot when we had food and went for a long time with no food at all. Your child might mimic this when they skip breakfast but devour lunch and dinner (and have multiple snacks in between). They simply satisfy all their food needs in 5 or 6 hours instead of distributing it across 12. Likewise, if your child likes to graze, they are following the lifestyle of a gatherer – eating little and as often as they can gather something to eat.

Some children appear challenging over food due to some **psychological reasons**, such as control, parental and child anxiety. If a child is struggling with autonomy over their own life, their eating is one of the areas that can become problematic – "fussy eating" might have roots in a completely unrelated aspect of their life! Likewise, if we as parents stress too much about children's eating, we can create a self-fulfilling prophecy and make their eating even more picky.

Some solutions for “fussy eating”

Remove the pressure	The more pressure we put on children, the less likely they are to eat the food we want them to eat. Or they'll eat it but there is a real danger that they'll begin regarding eating these foods as a negative experience, causing all sorts of control and emotional issues.
Hold the praise and rewards	Eating should be emotion free! Unfortunately, praising and rewarding attach emotional strings to eating and encourage children to override their innate cues of being full in favour of pleasing a parent or getting a reward (pudding?). Apparently, children who are praised for eating are more likely to end up being overweight in later life.
Encourage focus on eating	Encourage eating as a family and sitting together at the table. Make meal-times screen-free time. Instead use this time to talk with your family, play verbal games, tell jokes...
Allow sensory play with food and give more control	This can be done in different ways. You can cook with your children, let them decide what the menu will look like, what to plant and grow in your garden or terrace... You can encourage children to do arts and crafts with food. The point is to let them get used to textures and smells of food before they even attempt to eat them.
Keep exposing them to different types of food one step at a time	Our tastes buds change all the time so please don't get discouraged if your children keep refusing to try new things now. However, the trick is to introduce new types of food in small increments. This is because although sensory systems can mature, fears and behaviours might remain. If we do too much too soon, we run the risk of reinforcing the fears.

Finally, remember that likelihood is that your children will grow out of their childhood “quirkiness” when it comes to food. Only eating beige food most likely is not going to stay with them forever. But what will stay with them is how they felt during mealtimes: understood, empowered, and encouraged or hassled and pressured? You choose.

If you feel that you might need a little bit more support and guidance around this topic, please join me at our next webinar on the 1st of February at 1pm to hear more about issues related to children and eating. Here is the registration link:

<https://www.move-more.org/events/tips-for-managing-challenging-mealtimes/>

You can also email me on marijana@move-more.org if you have any specific questions you'd like me to address during this webinar.

