ThisMayHelp

What to do when your child is a fussy eater

As parents we obviously want our kids to be happy and well, but getting them to eat healthily isn't always as straightforward as we'd like, which could be linked to an emotional memory, a sensory issue or any number of other reasons. Here are five tips from NHS mental health professionals that might help if your child is a fussy eater.

1. Try to see things through their eyes
Food is an important part of everyday life but experiences along the way can cause us to make certain links that affect the way we think and feel about it. While a child's attitude towards food might not make sense to you, what they're feeling is very real for them.

2. Be flexible
As much as you might want to impose rules or consequences on them at mealtimes, forcing them to comply will only add to their stress and create more negative experiences around food. So pick your battles, be flexible and try to keep things in perspective.

3. Be curious
Remember that all behaviour is communication, but don't make assumptions about what's behind it. If they have issues with a particular type of food, ask them what the food means to them and why. There may not be a simple answer or just one single reason, and they may not be fully aware or able to put things into words, so be patient and remember that you don't need to have all the answers.

Some things to avoid when having a conversation about food or eating habits
- Sentences that start with the word 'you' can put people on the defensive. It's better to start with 'I', such as 'I've noticed', or 'I'm concerned'.
- Their behaviour may seem irrational to you but it's important to take them seriously and avoid undermining the importance of the issue or their feelings towards it.

4. Reframe mealtimes
Tension at the table doesn't help, so try to have a conversation and agree ways of making mealtimes enjoyable for your family while taking into consideration everyone's needs. There is no one way of doing it so try different things and find a compromise that works.

Some ways of making mealtimes more enjoyable
- Some families have found that assigning mealtime jobs like helping to prepare the meal, setting the table and clearing away after makes everyone feel involved and valued as part of the team.
- It can also help to agree some rules like making mealtimes screen-free and having some fun but uncomfortable forfeits for rule-breaking like having to do one of the more unpleasant chores twice in a row.
- Try to encourage pleasant conversation by asking everyone to share the best part of their day. It's important to keep the conversation light and enjoyable though, as anything negative may contribute towards more negative emotions associated with mealtime.
- Don't force the issue. If your attempts to make changes seem to create only more stress then go with what works best for your family and makes mealtimes as stress free as possible.

5. Consider the next steps

It's important to establish whether their issues with food are just a phase that might pass or are developing into more of a problem. Some people have found that keeping a diary can help to identify patterns and triggers. Follow your instincts and don't be afraid to reach out for help. As a first point of call, talk to your GP or other health professional.

Some additional resources that may help.

- BEAT: Worried about a friend or family member https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/support-someone-else/worried-about-a-friend-or-family-member/

- New Maudsley Carers: Caring for a loved one with an Eating Disorder https://newmaudsleycarers-kent.co.uk

- For more advice on parenting a child with mental health issues, visit our dedicated page https://thismayhelp.me/parenting-a-child-with-mental-health-issues/

- For more advice on eating disorders, visit our dedicated page https://thismayhelp.me/what-to-do-if-you-think-your-child-has-an-eating-disorder/

- NHS advice for supporting the mental wellbeing of others. Better Health: Every Mind matters https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/supporting-others/childrens-mental-health/

- For information on how to access NHS Mental health services visit https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/