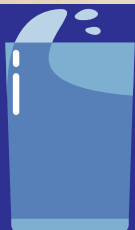


Fuss Free Mealtimes

Educator Handbook



HEALTHYEATING
ACTIVE LIVING

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NNSW LHD Health Promotion would like to acknowledge Sydney Local Health District and the PICNIC program for their support, guidance and willingness to share their program resources.

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June 2021

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Introduction

'Fuss Free Mealtimes' is a suite of resources available to support educators, families and carers in a child's eating journey. The aim of this resource is to provide information to assist educators when talking to families about their children's eating habits. It provides practical ideas to promote a positive mealtime environment in early childhood education and care services. It also includes a range of nutrition learning experiences and strategies that can be trialled.

Learning to eat is an important stage in a child's life. They learn to develop fine motor skills and independence, and discover the taste, texture and smell of foods. Like learning to walk and talk, learning to eat takes time and practice. Each child is unique and their eating journey can vary. We need to be patient with children and help them to learn.

A range of factors including the mealtime environment, social, emotional, physical, sensory and cognitive development and communication all play a role in this learning process. Eating new food is a skill that infants and children learn gradually.

Often the exploration of new foods can appear to be food rejection. For example, moving a food around in the mouth but not swallowing may be misinterpreted as a rejection of that food, however, this can be part of the acceptance process. Knowing how to respond to this can be confusing for educators and parents. Promoting positive mealtime environments and supporting children to build healthy relationships with food will contribute to the development of lifelong healthy eating habits.

It's important not to label a child as a 'fussy eater'. Labelling a child can 'put them into a box'. That child can repeatedly hear their label and often start to believe and behave like it, and others will treat them according to the label. You will see throughout this document that we refer to fussy eating as a behaviour, not as a person.





How Fuss Free Mealtimes relates to the NQS and EYLF

Fuss Free Mealtimes is part of a broader approach to support children to develop healthy eating behaviours. It can provide children with experiences that actively promote or initiate the exploration of ideas and thinking about healthy eating.

Creating a supportive environment for healthy eating links to the National Quality Framework and Early Years Learning Framework in the following categories.

National Quality Standards

Quality Area 2: Children's health and safety.

Standard 2.1 Health - Each child's health and physical activity is supported and promoted.

NQS 2.1.3: Healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child

NQS 2.2.1: Healthy eating is promoted and food and drinks provided by the service are nutritious and appropriate for each child

Under this standard there are opportunities for educators to:

- Engage children in experiences, conversations and routines that promote relaxed and enjoyable mealtimes and promote healthy lifestyles and good nutrition
- Model, reinforce and implement healthy eating and nutrition practices with children during mealtimes
- Support children to show an awareness of healthy lifestyles and good nutrition

Early Years Learning Framework

OUTCOME 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Children feel safe, secure, and supported
- Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency
- Children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities
- Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect

OUTCOME 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation
- Children respond to diversity with respect
- Children become aware of fairness
- Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment

OUTCOME 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing
- Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing

OUTCOME 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity
- Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating
- Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another
- Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials

OUTCOME 5: Children are effective communicators

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes
- Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media
- Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work
- Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking



Background

What is fussy eating?

A child who has fussy eating behaviour is generally a child who is unwilling (or reluctant) to try new foods. Fussy eating may also include a child only eating certain types of food, textures of food and/or rejecting familiar foods.

Fussy eating is a normal part of child development. Up to 50% of all 0-3 year old children refuse to eat new and different foods at least half the time. For some children, fussy eating tendencies are short-lived, but for others, they can last for much longer. The health impacts of fussy eating are usually low, however children who have fussy eating behaviours for a long time may have lower levels of vitamin E, vitamin C, folate and fibre.

Understanding the difference between the normal developmental stages of food exploration and problematic fussy eating will help decide how to prevent and deal with it. Supporting children in their food journeys can help them to learn how to eat the right amount of food, enjoy a variety of foods and have a good relationship with food throughout their life.

Common reasons for fussy eating

Below is a list of common factors that contribute to challenging or having fussy eating tendencies.

Grazing

Children can easily fill up on milk, juice and snacks that are not part of their regular mealtimes. This can mean they feel full at mealtimes and not interested in eating, therefore appearing fussy.

Distractions

Distractions at mealtimes, such as the television, iPad, phones or toys can cause children to be less interested in food. These types of distractions at a mealtime can allow children to ignore or disregard their hunger cues and potentially under or over eat. For example, eating mindlessly whilst watching television or choosing to watch the iPad instead of eating.

Independence

Toddlers are at a stage of their lives where they are starting to develop independence. Choosing and refusing food is one way that children assert their independence. Children quickly learn they can gain some control and attention over their families through food and making a fuss at mealtimes.



Is it more than fussy eating? When to seek further support from health professionals

For most toddlers fussy eating is a phase that they will eventually pass. However, if the problem continues or you have concerns, talk with parents and encourage them to see a health professional. Occasionally fussy eating is linked to medical problems and referral to a Paediatrician, Speech Pathologist, Dietitian or Occupational Therapist may be necessary. It is also useful to monitor how children are growing by using a growth chart. Poor growth can be an indication of serious medical problems.

Medical Conditions that can cause feeding problems include:

- Gastro-oesophageal reflux
- Difficulty swallowing in a coordinated way
- Food allergies or intolerances
- Additional needs, for example autism
- Food aversions due to a bad experience, such as choking or reflux

Signs that there may be a medical condition contributing to fussy eating:

- Swallowing issues
- Coughing, gagging, choking, pain or watery eyes while eating
- Iron deficiency
- Child is losing weight or failing to grow
- Child eats only an extremely limited variety of food
- Child eats only certain textures or colours of food
- Frequent tantrums over food

Growth rates

Children experience a rapid period of growth in their first year of life. After 12 months, their growth normally slows down. This can cause their appetite to slow down. If a child is eating less than usual, this can raise alarm bells for families and make mealtimes distressing. For example, a child at 14 months may eat less food than a child at 9 months. Whilst it is important to provide toddlers with a variety of foods to make sure they get adequate nutrition, it is just as important to let them respond to their hunger cues and not force them to eat more food than they want to.

Over exposure to highly processed sugary and salty foods

Children have a natural preference for sweet and salty foods and tend to dislike sour and bitter tastes. It is important to limit children's exposure to sweet and salty foods to prevent them from developing a strong desire to only eat foods such as chips, chocolate and lollies.

Tiredness

If dinner time is late, a child may simply be tired causing them to act more irrational over food and appear fussy.

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How to tackle fussy eating – The Division of Responsibility

The Ellyn Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding is a helpful model to understand how to support children on their food journeys. This model encourages parents and carers to take leadership with the what, when and where of feeding and to let the child decide whether to eat and how much. Put simply: parent provides and child decides.

The Parent's/Caregiver's Role

Caregivers decide WHEN, WHERE and WHAT a child will eat. This means their job is to provide nutritious food, decide how often food is offered (through regular meal and snack times), and provide a relaxed child-friendly mealtime environment. This should include using appropriately sized utensils for children, and sitting and eating with the children.

Parents/caregiver's/educators are responsible for:

- Providing family meals
- Choosing which food and preparing it
- Not letting children have food or drinks (except for water) between meals and snacks
- Ensure there are no distractions at meals times
- Leading by example to show a child how to behave at family mealtimes
- Providing unfamiliar foods that a child can learn to eat in their own time
- Being considerate of a child's lack of food experience without catering to likes and dislikes

The Child's Role

The child's role is to decide WHETHER and HOW MUCH to eat. Children can tell when they are hungry and when they are full and can self-regulate their eating. This means after food has been served, we allow them to eat without pressure. We don't give any encouragement or guidance on what to eat from their plate aside from helping with cutting or managing a texture. If we try to control their eating by getting them to eat more or less, we interfere with children's ability to get to know their hunger and fullness signals.

A child is responsible for:

- Choosing to eat or not eat at a meal
- Eating as little or as much as they want
- Learning to eat the food their parents eat
- Learning to behave well at mealtimes

When We Take Over Their Feeding Role

Taking over your child's job by either pressuring or restricting their eating can have the opposite effect to what we want to achieve. We can run into both short and long term problems such as:

Short term

- Greater stress at meals (for you and them)
- Becoming a fussy eater

Long term

- Losing the ability to know when they are full
- Increasing the likelihood of being overweight
- Eating less variety of food
- Eating a less nutritious diet

For a while you may not notice any progress in your child's eating. If we leave them to their feeding role they will progress slowly as their skills increase and courage boosts.



Fuss Free Mealtimes key themes

Parents and carers of children who have fussy eating behaviours are often anxious about their child's eating patterns. When having conversations with parents about how to create fuss free mealtimes, it is useful to reinforce the importance of remaining calm and making mealtimes positive.

Fuss Free Mealtimes has 9 key themes. Each of these themes and the related key messages are based on the latest evidence when it comes to prevention and early intervention of fussy eating behaviours. The themes are;

1. Make mealtimes enjoyable
2. Stick to a simple routine
3. Trust their tummies
4. Be a positive role model
5. Food isn't a good reward
6. Avoid distractions
7. Repeat, repeat, repeat
8. Involve children
9. Parent provides, child decides

Fuss Free Mealtimes



Make mealtimes enjoyable

Choose to create positive food experiences at mealtimes.

- Eat meals as a family
- Talk calmly and positively
- Allow enough time to enjoy meals together
- Try eating in other places (like a backyard picnic)

Parent provides, child decides

When you do your job with mealtimes, your child will learn to do theirs.

- A parent's job is to provide the food and choose when and where a child will eat
- A child's job is to decide if they will eat and how much
- Avoid offering alternatives for uneaten meals
- Taking time to like foods is part of normal development



Trust their tummies

Let the decision to stop eating be theirs, children naturally stop when they are full.

- Resist pressuring your child to eat
- Avoid force feeding, coaxing or bribing
- Provide small serves and offer more if still hungry
- Allow your child to decide how much to eat
- If your child is full accept their decision to stop eating

Stick to a simple routine

Children love routine. Having a food routine helps children know what to expect.

- Offer food every 2-3 hours - that's three meals with small snacks in between
- Limit grazing on snacks so children are hungry at mealtimes
- Have a before meal routine with a pack up or 'get ready' warning and washing hands
- Have an after meal routine like clearing the table



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Repeat, repeat, repeat

It can take over 10 times for a child to accept a new food, so keep offering it.

- Offer new food with food your child likes
- Introduce one new food at a time
- Try separating foods so they are not touching
- Cook foods in different ways like raw, steamed or baked vegetables
- Make food fun like using cookie cutters to create shapes



Be a positive role model

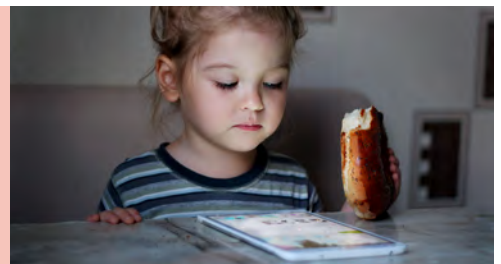
Your family is your child's first teacher.

- Model eating and enjoying a variety of foods together
- Eat as a family serving the same food to everyone
- Don't be rude to food. Be respectful about food
- Don't yuck my yum, everyone has different tastes
- Try not to overreact in what you say or with body language

Avoid distraction

Parents and children can both be distracted at mealtimes.

- Switch off all screens including TV, iPad and phone
- Put toys away
- Use mealtimes as a chance to talk



Food isn't a good reward

Using food as a reward can change a child's relationship with food.

- Avoid food rewards like "if you don't eat your vegetables you won't get dessert" or "clean your room and you will get a chocolate"
- Try non-food based rewards like extra play time, stickers, praise or special activities, games or a visit to the park

Involve children

Children are more likely to try food they've explored in some way.

- Involve children in vegetable gardening, meal planning, shopping, cooking and food play
- Ask your child to help set the table, choose a placemat, plate or cup
- Encourage smelling, touching and tasting familiar and unfamiliar foods
- Let children feed themselves - mess is okay



For more information
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How to support extremely fussy eaters

The tips provided in the Fuss Free Mealtimes resources are appropriate to use for all children, whether they are good eaters or extremely fussy eaters. For some parents and carers, mealtimes are constantly a source of stress and may involve frequent tears and tantrums. It may be useful to view the process of becoming a good eater in steps.

Before expecting a child with extremely fussy eating behaviours to eat a wide variety of food, they should first be exposed to the food and become familiar with it. This is a slow and sometimes frustrating process. The infographic below provides a list of steps that can be taken, in any order, to help encourage fussy eaters to try new food without overwhelming them.

It is important through this process not to force, bribe or pressure the child to eat, not even just a bite, nibble or taste. Children, especially those with fussy eating behaviours, need to be able to trust family and staff. They need to feel comfortable during mealtimes and not feel scared of being pressured into eating. Talk calmly to the child and try not to make a big deal about the food. Sometimes the more attention you give the child, even if it is positive, the more likely the child will remain fussy. Children should also be reassured that they can take one bite and spit into a tissue if they do not like it.

For more ideas on sensory exposure to foods, see the Be a Veg Explorer¹ resource.

Tolerate the food on their plate



Look at and talk about the food (colour, size, watch others eat)



Smell food

Touch food



Lick, bite, taste and chew food

¹ Google 'Be a Veg Explorer' to find this resource. It has been developed by Northern NSW Local Health District (NNSW LHD).

Supporting Fuss Free Mealtimes at your Service

How to create a positive eating environment

Mealtimes are necessary to provide children with essential nutrients. However they are just as important for providing opportunities to practice social, language and independence skills. Creating a supportive and positive mealtime setting is a great way to help children gain a positive relationship with food and become good eaters.

The following ideas will help to support a 'whole of service' approach to creating a positive eating environment in your early childhood education and care service. They are grouped using the fuss free mealtime key themes. This list is not exhaustive! Talk to other educators at your service to come up with new ideas that may work for you.



Make mealtimes enjoyable

Mealtimes should be relaxed, comfortable and enjoyable for children and educators. Ideas to create a positive mealtime environment include:

- Sit and eat with the children
- Talk calmly and use positive language
- Decorate the table. Try colourful cups and plates, a nice tablecloth or a vase to put flowers or herbs in
- Have children make their own placemats using photographs of themselves and their families or colouring in/painting different foods
- Use mealtimes as a chance to talk. It is a wonderful opportunity for social conversations between children and educators. Learning to listen to others and engage in conversation is a valuable life skill
- Foster good manners at mealtimes. Promote saying “thank you” to someone for providing food, encourage one person talking at a time, ask children to chew with their mouth closed and wait to finish their mouthful of food before talking

Parent provides, child decides

A parent's job is to provide the meal or snack, and choose when and where a child will eat. A child's job is to decide if they will eat and how much. In the child care setting, food is provided either by the parent or the service. In either case, the following tips will help:

- Mealtimes can be slow. Taking time to learn to like a food is a normal part of development
- Stay calm and keep mealtimes positive
- Give children the opportunity to do their 'job' (deciding if and how much to eat)
- Avoid offering alternatives for uneaten meals

Trust their tummies

Children are good at regulating the amount of food they eat.

- Resist pressuring children to eat. Pressure may include force feeding, coaxing or bribing
- If service provides food, serve child size portions and give children the opportunity to have more
- Allow children to decide how much of their meal to eat
- Avoid offering alternatives for uneaten meals
- Acknowledge when child is full and accept their decision

Stick to a simple routine

Children love routine. Having a food routine helps children know what to expect.

- Have mealtimes (both lunch and snack times) at set times each day
- Limit grazing on snacks so children are hungry at mealtimes
- Have a meal readiness routine with a pack up or 'get ready' warning and washing hands

Repeat, repeat, repeat

It can take over 10 times for a child to accept a new food so it's important to keep presenting it. It's up to a child to decide what they eat from their plate and how much!

- Encourage parents not to give up and reassure them to be persistent
- If service provides food, during menu changes be sure to offer new foods with familiar foods
- Consider taste testing sessions where you can introduce one new food at a time (with familiar foods also on offer)
- Create nutrition learning experiences that make food fun and interesting

Be a positive role model

Parents, caregivers and siblings are a child's first teacher. What educators do can also influence what children do.

- Model eating and enjoying a variety of foods
- Sit and eat with the children
- Don't be rude to food. Talk positively and respectfully about food
- Have a positive approach. Remind children they are 'learning to like this food'
- Try not to overreact in what you say or with your body language

Avoid distraction

Educators and children can both be distracted at mealtimes.

- Put toys, activities and technology away
- Use mealtimes as a chance to sit quietly and talk

Food isn't a good reward

Using food as a reward can change a child's relationship with food.

- Do not use food as a reward or withhold food from children for behaviour management purposes
- If you use rewards, try non-food based rewards like praise, extra play time, stickers or reward charts

Involve children

Children are more likely to try food they have had the chance to explore in some way. This includes all tasks linked to mealtimes. It's a great opportunity for children to also practice and develop independence.

- Invite children to help set the table. If service offers food, children can help put placemats, bowls, plates, cups and cutlery on the table
- If parents provide food, children can help put out lunchboxes, water bottles and cups
- Provide a small jug so children can pour their own drinks
- Where appropriate, serve food on platters and provide small tongs and serving spoons for children to serve themselves
- If children have lunch boxes, encourage them to open their own containers, food packets and unwrap their sandwiches
- Provide a tub of soapy water for older children to rinse their dishes
- Ask children to put their rubbish in the bin. You can also provide different bins for recycling, compost and general waste to teach them about environmental sustainability
- Encourage children to help clean up mess and spills. Keep a sponge nearby for children to access
- Involve children in cooking experiences and help them develop important skills to prepare and cook nutritious foods
- Involve children in creating the service menu
- Build a veggie garden at the service and have children plant, water and then cook with produce
- Let children feed themselves – be patient, mess is ok!
- Encourage food exploration through planned and spontaneous activities. Try smelling, touching and tasting familiar and unfamiliar foods



Talk positively about food

Mealtimes also provide natural opportunities to discuss eating with children. When talking to children about food, it is helpful to use the terms 'everyday' and 'sometimes' foods and avoid calling sometimes food bad, naughty, unhealthy, treat or junk food. All food has its place and it is important not to allow foods to create negative feelings.

Research shows that only talking about food as 'healthy' does not influence food choices. Our food preferences are more influenced by the way food affects our senses. Therefore, it is far more effective talking about the smell, taste, colour, shape and texture of food in addition to the benefits they have to our body. Talking to children about healthy food being fun, enjoyable and tasty will help children develop a positive relationship with food, for example "yummy, crunchy carrots".

At times words are not necessary. Educators can recognise how a child is eating through gestures such as nodding and smiling, rather than providing verbal praise or comments on what has not been eaten. This will encourage a child to respond to their own cues.

A note on language

Language can have a large impact on both a child's relationship and behaviour around food. The messages we give children can positively and negatively impact their eating habits now and into the future.

There are some phrases and language to consider that may help to keep mealtimes positive.

- Don't be rude to food: this can be included as a mealtime ground rule or used as a prompt to address comments such as "this is disgusting" or "this is yuck" at mealtimes
- "My taste buds aren't ready for that yet": a way for children to explain that they don't like that food at the moment. A good alternative to "I don't like this" or "I won't eat this" comments at mealtimes
- 'Learning it' foods, 'liking it' foods, 'loving it' foods: identifying if it is a food that a child loves, likes or is learning to like is a way to discuss the learning process and refer to foods that a child hasn't yet learnt to like. It also helps them to understand that although they may not like it now, they may like it in the future.

Both educators and parents may benefit from being familiar with these phrases. They are beneficial in a range of situations.

Promote cultural foods during mealtimes

Food is an integral part of many cultures and provides a great platform to teach children about different cultures and countries.

- Encourage families to share their traditional recipes and cultural traditions
- Consider asking families if there are any important days and festivals celebrated and what traditional foods and activities are involved

Infants and young children learn how to self-feed and explore food using all of their senses, including touch, smell, sight and taste.

How to use the Fuss Free Mealtimes resources to educate families

Early childhood education and care services are an influential setting for children and their families. The Fuss Free Mealtimes poster can be displayed in your service for families to easily view. The poster may be used as a conversation starter and the fact sheet may be particularly useful for families who raise concerns over their child being fussy at mealtimes.

For families who are feeling overwhelmed with the suggestions, try asking them to reflect on what they are doing well. It may also be useful to encourage families to work on one strategy at a time. The fact sheet can also be given to families with children who are starting solids to help build a positive relationship with food, a supportive mealtime environment and promote lifelong healthy habits.

Another effective way to educate families is to lead by example. Show families photos of their children enjoying mealtimes at the service and eating nutritious foods and vegetables, especially if families express difficulty managing mealtimes at home. You can also share popular recipes that the children love to eat whilst in care, with families.

Nutrition learning experiences

Children are more likely to show healthy behaviours taught through practical eating learning experiences, such as through role playing with peers and adults, as opposed to formal instruction. Furthermore, children in preschool are unable to grasp concepts such as food groups and portion sizes, and teaching these concepts does not help children develop healthy behaviours.

Infants and young children learn how to self-feed and explore food using all of their senses, including touch, smell, sight and taste. This is an important part of the development process. There are endless opportunities to incorporate eating learning experiences through a range of fun and educational activities. Consider incorporating the key messages of choose water as a drink, eat more fruit and vegetables and choose healthier snacks.

The Munch & Move Healthy Eating Learning Experiences is an excellent resource filled with activities that promote healthy eating². This resource has been designed to provide early childhood educators with suggestions for a range of fun, innovative and developmentally appropriate learning experiences that can be included and incorporated into everyday routines, interactions and curriculum. It identifies books, songs, experiments, games and hands on cooking opportunities related to food that can be used.

Another useful and comprehensive resource full of activities is Be A Veg Explorer³. While there is a focus on exploring vegetables, the principles can be applied to the exploration of any type of food.

Taste Testing

A taste testing session is a great opportunity to influence children's food selection, increase their knowledge and improve their attitudes towards eating a variety of foods. The session can include a brief educational component first followed by taste testing both familiar and unfamiliar foods.

Children only need a small taste of each food. Keep to a small selection, perhaps two familiar foods that the children will feel comfortable and safe to try, and two unfamiliar foods. Think about a variety of colours, textures and flavours.

Before starting, engage the children in a discussion about the ground rules for the taste testing session. As well as basic rules, be sure to include:

- Don't be rude to food – give children examples of how they can express disliking a food without being disrespectful or negative about it e.g. "My taste buds aren't ready for this yet" (to avoid "this is disgusting")
- Use positive language – encourage children to find positive ways to express how they felt about tasting a food e.g. "I am learning to like this food", "I like this food", "I love this food". Explain that not everyone will like all foods, but it's good to give new foods a try – you never know when your taste buds are ready to like it!

² Google 'Healthy Eating Learning Experiences Munch & Move' to find this resource. It is part of the Munch & Move program by NSW Ministry of Health.

³ Google 'Be a Veg Explorer' to find this resource. It has been developed by Northern NSW Local Health District (NNSW LHD).



Taste testing activity




Below is a guide you can use for a taste testing activity. Amend to suit your own service's needs. You may wish to have a taste testing recording sheet ready for each child to complete as they taste.

Prepare the children for the activity by getting them to wash their hands and sit at a table (ensure there is at least one adult per table). Explain that you are going to do a fun tasting activity today and reinforce the ground rules for the activity.

Discuss the foods that they are going to be tasting. Do the children know the name of the food? How is it grown/made? What colour is it? Do they think it will be soft or hard, crunchy or juicy, sweet or sour? Use lots of different words to describe and find out about each food.

Ask each adult to serve children a small piece of food onto a serviette or plate. Start with a familiar food that most children are likely to know and enjoy. Allow children to touch, feel and smell the foods. Continue to discuss the characteristics of the food. Repeat this process for each food. Adults should reinforce positive language about the food and support children to express their experience in respectful ways. Record each child's response to each food item on the taste testing recording sheet.

Bring the children together as one group. Discuss the taste testing - what was their favourite, who tasted something new, who discovered they liked something they didn't think they would, why did they like it? Remember to keep the language positive. Encourage children to tell their parents about the foods they tasted today.

Today I tried:	 I loved it!	 I liked it!	 I'm still learning to like it	Comments

Mindful Eating

Mindful eating involves being aware of the food you eat and choosing to eat food that is satisfying and nourishing for your body. It involves taking notice of physical hunger and fullness cues to guide your decisions to begin and end eating. Children are born with the natural ability to take notice and respond to their hunger cues and regulate their appetite. Unfortunately, this ability is easily lost when children are encouraged to eat when they are not hungry or are distracted by technology and toys when eating.

You can help children develop a positive relationship with food and teach them to respect their bodies through the way you talk about food as well as promoting eating mindfully.

- Minimise distraction and focus on the experience of eating
- Discuss the food you are eating with children and how it affects all your senses; the colour, shape, texture, sound, smell and taste
- Encourage children to savour each mouthful of food and finish what is in their mouth before they take another bite
- When talking to children about their hunger cues, you can ask them to listen to their 'belly voice' to help decide if they are hungry and when they have eaten enough food
- Ask children how the food makes them feel

Mindful eating activity

Below is a sample script you can use with the children to conduct a mindful eating exercise. Give the children time after each question to think about your request and share their observations with the group.

"Today we are going to do an activity where we are going to use all our senses to eat a sultana. That means we are going to pay particular attention to the look, feel, smell, sound and taste of our food.

First of all, can everyone look at the sultana? What is its shape? How big is it? What colour is the sultana? Can you notice any changes in your mouth as you look at the sultana? What's the feeling in your stomach?

Now, pick up the sultana slowly. What does it feel like in your hand? [Prompt: sticky or dry; hard or squishy; smooth or wrinkly] Bring the sultana up to your nose. What does it smell like?

It is now time to slowly open your mouth and place the sultana on your tongue without biting into it. Feel the sultana in your mouth and on your tongue. In your mind, think about what it feels like. What do you taste? Take a bite into it and think about what you taste and what it feels like. As you continue to taste, try not to swallow the sultana right away. Does the taste and feeling change as you are chewing? When you are ready to swallow, feel the food going down your throat. Pay attention to your stomach and what it may be feeling. How are you feeling?"



Common Questions and Concerns about Fussy Eating

The following information provides guidance for practices within a child care service and should also support educators when discussing fussy eating with parents.

What if a child does not eat the food provided?

It is common for families and/or early childhood educators to feel concerned when a child refuses to eat a meal. Remember as a parent, carer and/or early childhood educator, it is your role to provide children with nutritious food at set times and in an area of your choosing. A child will decide how much they want to eat and whether they eat at all.

Children are born with the natural ability to listen and respond to their hunger cues and regulate what they eat over a few days - a skipped meal or two will not harm a healthy child; a healthy child will eat when they are hungry. If children are forced to eat when they are not hungry they can easily lose this important ability to respond to their hunger cues. Not all toddlers and children will eat the same amount every day. It is normal for them to eat larger portions one day and smaller portions the next. It is more helpful to look at their overall food intake for the week instead of focusing on each meal or day.

It can take over 10 times for children to develop a liking for a food, so it is important to be persistent and keep exposing children to a food even if they initially refuse it. To reduce rejection of entire meals or snacks:

- Provide at least one food that you know the child likes and introduce one new food at a time, in a small portion.
- Serve everyone what is on the menu but leave it up to the child to decide whether they want to eat it or not.
- Avoid offering different foods for uneaten meals, even if they are nutritious options. Children quickly learn that if they cause enough fuss over meals they will get a replacement that they like.
- Remain calm, talk in neutral tones and do not pressure children to eat. If the child still refuses to eat, simply take the food away and wait until the next scheduled meal or snack before offering something new.
- Make sure there are no other distractions like toys, phones or the TV around.

It is important to remember that mealtimes are a learning opportunity and involve more than just what food is being served. Children also learn important social skills and table manners. Even if they are not joining in eating, they can still be part of a fun mealtime.



Why is it important to have a mealtime routine?

Grazing often happens when children do not have a mealtime routine. This can cause them to feel 'full' at mealtimes and not hungry. For example, it is common for children to be given milk or juice to drink between set meal and snack times or to be given more milk than required. Children should be offered food every 2-3 hours. Having a mealtime routine, such as 3 meals a day and a small snack in between is important to set up good eating behaviours. Only water should be provided between these set mealtimes.

How much food should a child eat?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines provide general advice about the amount and types of food needed for health and wellbeing. Keep in mind these are guidelines, and the amount of food children eat will vary day to day. Offer a variety of food from the five food groups and let the child decide how much food they want to eat. For more information visit the Eat For Health website where you will find the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating and Dietary Guidelines for children aged 2-8 years of age.

How do I manage challenging behaviours during mealtimes?

During mealtimes, it is important to speak in a calm tone and give little attention to challenging behaviours. Set clear and realistic expectations of behaviour at mealtimes for children. This may include introducing an expectation to use table manners and saying "no thank you" when a child doesn't want to eat something. Other useful behaviour expectations may be sitting down while eating and removing any food not eaten after 30 minutes to avoid mealtimes becoming too long. It is important that educators and all family members are good role models and also follow these guidelines.

Why is it okay for a child to make a mess while eating?

Learning to eat and feed with independence is an important stage of development. Children will develop fine motor skills and muscle coordination, as well as learn about the taste, texture, smell and temperature of food. Children naturally want to explore and experiment with food which involves squashing, throwing and feeling the different textures of food. The stimulation children get from feeling different foods and learning to eat also helps with brain development. This process will involve mess. Allowing children to use their senses to explore food at mealtimes can be very enjoyable and help them build a positive relationship with food.

Many parents and carers can feel stressed or overwhelmed with the mess that children make at mealtimes. It is important to try to stay relaxed and make mealtimes positive and enjoyable.

Tips to help deal with a mess;

- Provide a few pieces of finger food at a time to avoid the entire meal being tipped on the floor and wasted
- For children in a high chair, place a sheet, plastic or newspaper underneath them to allow for an easy clean up
- Put a plastic painting apron on the child to protect their clothes and make cleaning up easier
- Leave bath time until after dinner
- Eat meals as a family and show the child the correct way to eat and behave at the table by being a role model
- When the weather is warm try to eat some meals outside to make cleaning up easier
- Once it becomes apparent that the child is not interested in eating and is just playing with their food, take the meal away



Why can't I reward a child with food?

Using food as a reward can make it more difficult for children to change their eating habits. Using sometimes foods, such as chocolate, lollies and ice-cream, as rewards can make those foods seem more appealing. Rewarding children with food also encourages them to eat in the absence of hunger.

Examples of situations where food is used as a reward include:

- Rewarding a child to eat certain food - "Eat your vegetables and you will get dessert"
- Rewarding achievements - "I'm so proud of you for doing well in your test. You can have a lolly"
- Rewarding a child to behave - "If you behave at the shops, I will buy you a chocolate"
- Providing a child with food because they are upset or to help them feel better - "I know your arm is sore. Let's get an ice-cream to make you feel better"
- Providing child with food as a bribe - "If you don't do what I tell you then you won't get a packet of chips"

Rewarding a child to eat certain foods, such as vegetables, tends to reduce their liking for that food, by sending a message that the food is bad. Giving children food to praise them or help them feel better can cause children to become reliant on food to regulate their emotions, as well as associate being good or happy with certain foods. Children need to learn how to manage their emotions. They need to be able to tolerate and address feelings and stress as a part of life without it triggering eating.

How do I limit children's eating of sometimes foods?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend that discretionary foods (sometimes foods) should be limited because they are high in fat, sugar and/or salt and can take the place of nutrient rich core foods. Outside of the early childhood education and care service and home environment there are many situations where children are exposed to these foods. Limiting the sometimes foods at your service or at home is a practical and useful way to reduce the amount of sometimes foods children eat.

For example:

- Stock the cupboard with 'everyday' foods at home
- Ensure the service menu only provides foods that contribute to children's nutrient requirements
- Provide parents with a list of everyday foods to pack in their child's lunch box that are easy to prepare and well-liked by children

This can help create a supportive and healthy food environment. It can be counterproductive to overtly prohibit or restrict a child from consuming sometimes foods. For example:

- Storing a packet of lollies at home for the children to see but not allowing them to eat them
- Educators discarding (or sending home) sometimes foods from a child's lunch box

Restricting food in front of children can increase their desire for that food and result in them overeating or sneaking the food later.

What about 'vegie smuggling'?

Vegie smuggling can be one way to provide extra nutrients for children who are extremely fussy eaters and can take the pressure off families who are worried about their child not eating any vegetables.

Many family meals naturally have vegetables as ingredients that are not so obvious such as grated zucchini or carrots in bolognese sauce. These types of meals can be a good starting point and they create opportunity to gradually add more. It is still important to expose and familiarise children to vegetables and serve meals with a few pieces of identifiable bite-sized vegetables on the side of their plate. Vegie smuggling is not a long-term solution, as we want children to develop healthy lifelong habits, which involves enjoying foods such as vegetables.

What is a supertaster?

Some adults and children have much more sensitive taste buds. These people are called 'Supertasters'. This can mean new foods taste a lot stronger and may take longer to get used to.

The good news is that supertasters are not less likely to have a limited diet than non-supertasters, as long as they're also given the opportunities to get used to new foods.

Supertasters learn to enjoy strong flavoured foods as long as parents are patient and provide a few more exposures to the food in a 'no pressure environment'. Remember it's the child's job to decide if they want to eat or not. They might be a supertaster and may need to try a few more times, but they'll get there!

Useful Websites

Eat For Health

<https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au>

Visit Eat for Health to learn about the Australian Dietary Guidelines, which provides up to date advice about the amount and kinds for foods children and adults need to eat for health.

Ellyn Satter Division of Responsibility

<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed>

Information on roles and responsibilities to supporting a child on their food journey. Includes age specific information, meal and snack ideas, and problem solving tips.

Australian Breastfeeding Association

<https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/index.html>

This website includes breastfeeding information and support. There is also a range of resources and answers to questions that can help parents on their breastfeeding journey.

Royal Children's Hospital Feeding Development

<https://www.rch.org.au/feedingdifficulties/development>

Background information on typical feeding development that may be of interest to educators learning about a child's feeding patterns.

PICNIC Project

<https://www.picnicproject.com.au>

PICNIC is a program that has been created to support new parents feeding their infants and toddlers. It has age specific information on a range of feeding and mealtime topics, as well as social media platforms.

PICNIC Facebook: <https://m.facebook.com/PicnicMNC>

PICNIC Instagram: [@picnic_mnc](#) Instagram

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