



Food challenges with your child if they have additional needs

Top Tips and useful information to make food time easier.

Information accurate as at
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Introduction

It is perfectly normal for toddlers to refuse to eat or even taste new foods. Do not worry about what your child eats in a day or if they do not eat everything at mealtimes. It's more helpful to think about what they eat over a week.

The best way for your child to eat well and try new foods is to copy you, so it is important that you eat alongside your child when you can. Children learn from seeing their parents and other family members eating and enjoying a wide range of foods.

Any child can be a fussy eater. And all children will refuse food at some point. If your child is active and gaining appropriate weight, and they seem well, then they're getting enough to eat.

However, refusing foods can be common if your child has additional needs. Neurodivergent children particularly often experience senses such as the taste, smell, sight and feel of food in a different way to other children.

You might not be sure at first what it is that is making your child refuse foods or react negatively to them, or whether it is anything to be concerned about.

But if you are worried, talk to your health visitor or GP.

Parent/carers often ask:

- My child is a fussy eater, should I be worried?
- My child refuses food, how can I change this?
- My child has meltdowns at mealtimes, what can I do?
- My child often eats non-food items, should I be concerned?



Your child's behaviour around food

Issues with refusing food can include:

- Being upset or overwhelmed by smells
- Being upset by the sound of people eating
- Being upset by loud noises such as the TV, washing machine or shouting
- Disliking having different foods on the plate at once
- Having foods on a plate touching each other
- Disliking combined foods (like putting gravy on top of meat)
- Preferring pale-coloured or beige foods
- Getting upset at changes in routine or how food is served (on a blue plate instead of a white one or sausages with peas instead of sweetcorn)
- Wanting to use a particular fork, cup, plate
- Finding it hard to sit still to eat

In order to find out what triggers or overwhelms your child, try keeping a diary of behaviour around mealtimes and foods, so you start to recognise patterns – this might include:

- whether there is background noise or not
- where they are sitting
- what plate they are using
- how food is organised on the plate
- whether other people are eating noisily around them
- whether foods are presented differently or in new combinations
- you give them something they were not expecting, or something that is new
- whether they are calm enough before mealtimes begin

Once you understand the pattern, you can start to plan around it to minimise some of the barriers.

Top tips and ideas

What can I do to help my child feel comfortable to eat?

You can follow some 'rules' depending on what exactly it is that is an issue for your own child:

- Make sure food isn't touching other food on a plate or use a separate plate for new foods
- Use the same plate, cup and cutlery each time
- Turn the TV/radio off or on – depending on what your child needs
- Allow them to sit in a different space if necessary
- Give small amounts then add more if wanted rather than overload the plate

Always try and avoid making meals a battleground. Try not to put pressure on them, and avoid getting stressed yourself, as they may pick up on your anxiety and be even less inclined to eat. Try to be patient and recognise it is likely to take time to change their behaviour.

Did you know?

Your child's stomach is only the same as the size of their fist.



Top tips and ideas (continued)

Portion Control

- Remembering the size of your child's stomach is quite small will help you keep the portions of food you give them at the right amount. Also remember that your child's appetite will vary from day to day.
- Give small amounts then add more if wanted rather than overloading the plate.
- When your child shows you or tells you they have had enough, let them stop eating even if there is still some food left on the plate, as this stops them over-eating even when they have had enough.

Did you know?

Your child's stomach is only the same as the size of their fist.

My child eats things that are not food - should I be concerned?

Pica is the medical term for when children eat non-edible items. Common items that children with pica eat can include sand, chalk, playdough, clothing, faeces, hair and paper. Children below the age of 18 months often explore objects in their mouths. Due to this, pica is not diagnosed below the age of 2 years. Pica occurs more frequently in children with learning difficulties and is often associated with autism.

Seek help if you are concerned. For general advice on eating well, fussy eating and eating difficulties – see the range of useful weblinks in this document. If you are still concerned, keep a record of what your child eats - when, where and how often - and share this with your GP or Health Visitor.

Useful sources of information and support

General advice on eating well in toddlers:

NHS:

- www.nhs.uk/baby-and-toddler-meal-ideas

British Nutrition Foundation:

www.nutrition.org.uk/nutrition-for/toddlers-and-pre-school

HENRY:

www.henry.org.uk

First Steps Nutrition:

www.firststepsnutrition.org/eating-well-resources

Fussy eating:

BBC Tiny Happy People-Fussy Eating and how to avoid mealtime battles:

www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zy8dp9q

These are helpful in relation to children with autism:

- www.family-action.org.uk/self-help/support-your-autistic-child-with-food-eating/
- www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/eating/all-audiences

HENRY

HENRY is a national charity that provides guidance, tips and training on helping families create a healthy start for their families. Visit their website for lots of useful information, recipes and other content.



[HENRY - Healthy Start, Brighter Future](http://www.henry.org.uk)

www.henry.org.uk



Useful sources of information and support (continued)

Tips on sensory processing difficulties with food:

www.sends.org.uk/blog/f/my-child-is-not-a-picky-eater-tips-for-sensory-difficulties

PICA:

- www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/managing-pica
- www.cambspborochildrenshealth.nhs.uk/services/cambridgeshire-community-paediatrics/pica-eating-non-edible-items/

General advice:

The National Autistic Society is a charity that supports families - their advice and guidance section has a lot of useful information - <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

ABSS SEND Family Resources

This Tip Sheet has been compiled as part of the A Better Start Southend (ABSS) Legacy, with the support of local partners and families – for other useful resources visit the ABSS website using the link below.



[Visit the ABSS Family Resources Page](http://www.abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/family-resources)

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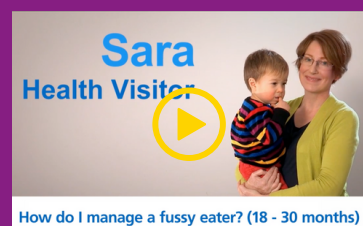


Fussy eaters

‘How do I manage a fussy eater? (18 to 30 months)’

By the NHS

www.nhs.uk/baby/weaning-and-feeding/fussy-eaters/



Jargon Buster

Here are some terms or abbreviations you might come across:

Pica

The medical term for when children eat non-edible items. Common items that children with pica eat can include sand, chalk, playdough, clothing, faeces, hair and paper.

Sensory Overload

Sensory overload occurs when the brain receives more input from the senses—such as light, sound, touch, taste, or smell—than it can effectively process. When overwhelmed, the brain may react as if facing a threat, triggering a fight, flight, or freeze response. In children, this can lead to meltdowns or distress that may be misinterpreted as ‘bad behaviour’, rather than a sign of sensory overwhelm.

Sensory Processing Disorder

A neurological condition in children that can affect the way the brain processes information coming in from the senses. They may be extra sensitive to sensory input (hypersensitivity) or not react to it at all (hyposensitivity).

ASD/C

Autistic Spectrum Disorder / Condition

Neurodiversity

A framework for understanding how people think, learn, and behave. Most people are neurotypical, meaning their brains function as expected by society. However, it's estimated that around 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent. Neurodiversity covers a wide range of conditions, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, and autism.



City Family



City Family is a local organisation that takes the good practice from A Better Start Southend (ABSS) and weaves it into their support services for local families. They connect parents and carers to support, services, and community networks, making family life a little easier. Whether you need advice, activities, or access to more specialist support, they can help you. Whatever your journey, you're not alone.

If you have any questions or concerns around family services in Southend, or need support, please contact City Family's Information and Guidance Service where their Navigators will be able to help you.

- **Call:** 01702 844188
- **WhatsApp/Live Chat:** 07507 242398
- **Email:** yfsouthend@cityfamily.org.uk
- **or visit** www.cityfamily.org.uk

You can also visit City Family's Service Map to explore services available to families across the city of Southend. www.cityfamily.org.uk/search/



Visit City Family's website for more information

www.cityfamily.org





A Better Start Southend

A Better Start Southend (ABSS) was at the heart of early years support for families in Southend from 2015 until March 2025.



ABSS delivered services that helped families:

- improve how they communicate with their little ones
- build social and emotional skills
- live healthier lives

As part of the legacy from ABSS, local partner organisations and parents worked closely with ABSS to assemble a range of resource packs for families and for practitioners who support families. This Information Sheet forms part of those resources.



[Learn more about the ABSS Family Resource Packs](https://www.abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/family-resources)

www.abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/family-resources

