

## Creating Positive Mealtimes

Mealtimes can be a common source of stress for parents. When a child refuses food, parents may become frustrated or worried their child is not eating enough. It is important to be consistent with your approach and make mealtimes a positive experience for all.

### Mealtime Environment

Children respond well to a mealtime routine. Routines help your child know what is coming and allow them to feel prepared.

#### Tips for good mealtime routines include:

- Offer nutritious meals and snacks about 5-6 times a day.
- Set aside 20-30 minutes for mealtimes and 10-20 minutes for snacks. If the food is not eaten within this time period, allow your child to leave the table or quietly remove their plate without reacting to how much or what they have eaten.
- Offer meals and snacks at the table/ in the highchair as much as possible.
- Eat together as a family as often as possible and model the behaviours you would like to see in your child.
- Allow your child some independence. You are responsible for providing the food (and when) and the mealtime environment; your child is responsible for what they eat.
- Remove distractions (screens) at meals so your child can focus on eating, engagement and enjoyment with food.



- Allow your child access to self-feed and explore food with their hands and utensils (even if most of it ends up on the floor during messy play).

### Encourage Food Engagement

- Allowing your child to help prepare some of the meal can encourage their interest in food and eating. You can talk to them about the food, how it is grown, why it is good for them and so on.
- You may want to start a veggie patch in your garden and have your child help pick the food.
- You may like to occasionally allow them to serve food their own plate (e.g. place shared salad on the dinner table).

## Fussy Eating

Fussy eating is common in children.

### It is important to:

- Keep mealtimes relaxed and remain calm.
- Respect that your child may have likes or dislikes. Offer a 'safe food' you know your child will eat (be sure to offer the safe food alongside the other foods, rather than using the safe food as a reward).
- Provide foods that are the right texture for your child based on their age and developmental abilities. If your child is struggling with a particular texture, try a similar food that they can manage. For example, yoghurt instead of milk; mince instead of chewy meat.
- If your child refuses a meal, wait until the next scheduled meal or snack before offering something new.
- Keep offering with new foods- it can take up to 30+ times for a child to adjust to a new food. Leave it a week, then try again!
- Don't force your child to eat – look for fullness cues in younger children and encourage your child to listen to their body.
- Appetite changes are normal, sometimes children eat less or more than usual and this is normal and okay.

Speak with your CF team if you need more support with mealtimes.

**Thank you to Jordan Brockett and Mylie McMahon, CF Dietitians, Perth Children's Hospital, for input into this factsheet.**

**Last reviewed August 2023.**