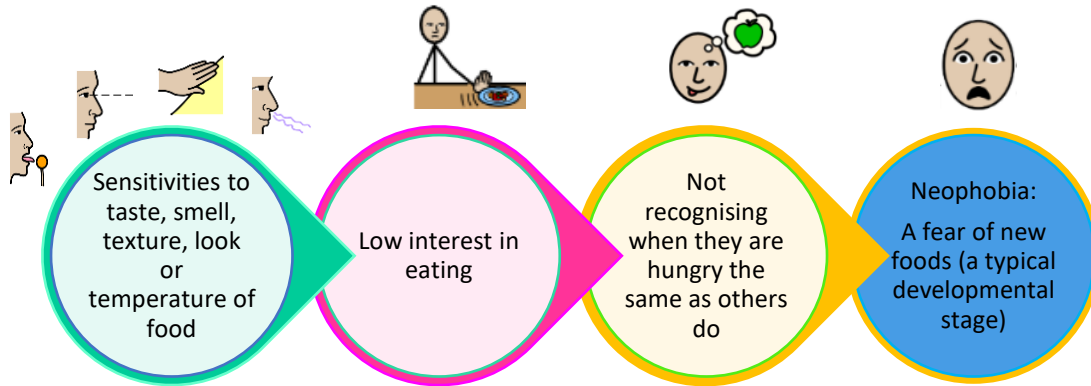


Advice for Anxious and Hesitant Eaters and Children with Limited Diets

There are a number of reasons why children can be anxious or hesitant around eating or drinking:



It can be worrying when your child is not eating as expected. You may find your child has “safe foods” (food that they will accept in most situations) but be reluctant to try new foods.

Do:



- Ensure your child has food they will accept available (regardless of what the ‘safe food’ is).
- Model eating new foods with your child with no pressure for them to try it.
- Outside of mealtimes encourage food exploration but don’t ask your child to touch, smell or eat it just allow them to explore foods in their own way.

Don't:



- **Prompt.** Your child might see this as pressure to eat making mealtimes a stressful experience e.g. asking them to try a new food and/or finish everything on their plate.
- **Hide.** If you hide or disguise food or medicines this may mean they don’t eat the ‘safe’ food again.
- **Withhold.** Withholding preferred foods won’t encourage to eat other foods.
- **Bribe.** Using rewards or bribes to encourage eating won’t help if they’re fearful.
- **Over Praise.** You may want to tell them ‘well done’ for eating, however this can draw attention to their eating and could put them off trying again if they perceive it as pressure. You know your child and how they respond so go with what feels right.

Other factors influencing eating:

- **Constipation.** First step ensure your child is having adequate fluids. If possible, add in extra fruit and vegetables. Consider if your child will have higher fibre cereal or bread. You might need to consider medication; we would recommend discussing with your GP.
- **High milk diets.** This can make your child feel full. Consider offering food first before their milk. You might also consider reducing the volume of milk offered.

If you are concerned about your child’s weight or any medical condition that may be impacting their ability to eat – e.g. constipation, reflux or vomiting, recurrent sore throats or ear infections please contact your GP.

Practical Tips

Presentation of Food:



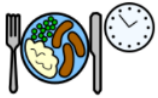
- Always offer the 'safe' foods and present new or different foods on a separate plate with no pressure to eat, smell or touch it.
- Serve food in a way that your child prefers e.g. certain foods not touching each other e.g. different textures, colours or temperatures. You could consider using a plate with sections.
- If your child likes to eat foods separately consider deconstructing meals e.g. presenting a sandwich in separate parts rather than putting all together.

Offering new foods:

- When introducing new foods only work on one or two foods at a time. It will take time, consistency and patience to build up a child's confidence with trying new foods.
- Introduce new foods that are very similar to the already accepted ones e.g. if your child only eats a chicken nugget try them with a different brand, shape or homemade breaded chicken.
- Children can struggle with foods that change in texture and flavour each time e.g. vegetables or fruit. Consider tinned or frozen as these are more likely to be the same each time. These are just as good nutritionally.



Mealtime routines:



- Provide regular mealtimes patterns and schedule snacks (snacks are 'mini meals'). This will help your child learn their hunger cues and can increase motivation to eat at mealtimes.
- Make mealtimes relaxed and sociable to reduce anxieties around eating. Try to stay calm! Try not to show any emotion you might feel about your child not eating as well as you would like as this can inadvertently cause them upset around eating.
- Reduce any sensory distractions at mealtimes if your child is sensitive to this e.g. consider background noises, cooking smells etc.
- Ensure your child is sat in an upright supported position when eating or drinking – try to find a way that they can rest their feet flat using something under their feet if needed.

Food experiences

- Provide opportunities to transfer new eating skills to real-world eating situations e.g. going to a café or out with friends
- Give opportunities for your child to be involved with food preparation e.g. helping you bake cakes, chop vegetables (if safe) and bring ingredients for you to make a meal. This can also include gathering food when you go shopping.



Nutrition

- Consider adding a vitamin and mineral supplement to your child's diet. Talk to a pharmacist about an age appropriate supplement and consider if there is a preferred flavour or format your child may prefer e.g. chewy, liquid, spray.

Don't try everything at once; start with one or two tips at a time. Don't give up! It will take time to see changes and these may be small steady steps at first.

Speech and Language Therapy, Community & Children's Directorate and Paediatric Dietitians

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