

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO FEEDING DEVELOPMENT AND PICKY EATING



+ 10 tips to help foster positive relationships with food



Newcastle
Speech Pathology

WHEN IS IT MORE THAN JUST FUSSY EATING?

Most children will go through phases of fussy eating where they may refuse to eat certain textures, tastes or even colours of foods. These however, are not long-term.

Children with a feeding difficulty or disorder may present with difficulties across a spectrum from relatively mild to quite severe, including:

- Have a decreased range or variety of foods
- Have a restricted range or variety of foods that is less than 20 different foods.
- Stop eating certain foods but often pick them back up in a few weeks OR lose the foods completely out of their diet
- May eat at least one food from most of all food textures.
- May refuse entire categories of foods.
- Occasionally may tolerate new food on their plate and touch or taste it (though they may not like the food after).
- Cry, scream, become upset, avoid eating or gag/vomit when they are not presented with their preferred foods.
- Mostly eat different food or variations of food than the rest of the family and may not eat with the family.
- Have a lower tolerance to new foods on their plates and usually do not want the food near them. Some may gag at others' food.

If you're facing battles over mealtimes, you know the stress it places on the family. You also know your concerns about your child's health, growth, emotional well-being and social skills. It's time to consult a Speech Pathologist. We help children develop their feeding skills and support families to rediscover the joy of family meals.

WHY ARE FEEDING SKILLS IMPORTANT?

Feeding is a complicated human experience. Its main role is to provide nutrition for growth and development but positive experiences with feeding also play a vital role in developing a child's social and communication skills.

It's much more complex than you might think! Feeding involves a whole range of sensory and physical experiences including looking at, touching and smelling foods, bringing the food or drink to the mouth, chewing and swallowing.



WHEN SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT MY CHILD'S FEEDING?

Feeding difficulties can occur at any stage of child development from birth onwards.

Some difficulties you may notice in your child include:

- Refusing foods
- Eating only certain textures of foods
- Challenging behaviours such as tantrums, meltdowns, difficulty staying at the table, retching and vomiting
- Choking or coughing when eating/drinking
- Difficulty chewing
- Difficulty with latching during breast and bottle feeding
- Loud/noisy breathing or change in breathing rate during feeding
- Difficulty transitioning to solid foods
- Arching their back or stiffening when feeding
- Crying or fussing when feeding
- Falling asleep when feeding
- Taking a long time to eat
- Pocketing foods (which means to hold food in their mouth)
- Drooling a lot or having liquid come out of their mouth or nose
- Having a gurgly, hoarse, or breathy voice during or after meals
- Not gaining weight or growing

Let's take a look at what we can expect from our children and find out if your child's feeding skills are on track.

0-3 MONTHS

Feeding Skills

- Latches onto nipple or bottle
- Breastfeeding is not painful or causing significant damage to the mother's nipple
- Tongue moves forward and back to suck
- Sucks and swallows well
- Is gaining weight appropriately
- Consume liquids only (milk/formula); baby cannot digest other types of food



Motor Development

- Very little neck and head control
- Uses facial expressions to indicate likes/dislikes
- Uses both their hands and mouths to explore objects
- They will bring their hand to their mouth and will start to grasp objects and bring them to their mouth



What you can do

- Support baby comfortably to feed.
- Play with your baby by talking to them, encouraging them to imitate your facial expressions, singing and encouraging tummy time.
- Offer baby toys for them to practice holding and exploring with their hands and mouth. Make sure they are large enough to not be a choking hazard.

4-6 MONTHS

Feeding Skills

- Shows interest in food & opens mouth when spoon approaches.
- Begins to eat cereals and smooth, pureed food (single ingredients only).
- Moves pureed food from front of mouth to back with tongue and swallows.
- May attempt to spit out to show they don't enjoy some flavours.



Motor Development

- Not yet sitting independently. May keep hands on the ground while sitting.
- Should be able to sit supported in a highchair (with foot rest) without slumping.
- Turns head towards or away from food
- Reaches towards food when hungry

What you can do

- Introduce a wide variety of tastes as baby accepts.
- Go slow with food introductions and follow allergen introduction rules.
- Present foods and wait for your child's cues (ie. open mouth, turning head). Don't force them.
- Respect child's refusal cues. This helps them learn to regulate hunger/fullness cues.
- Keep mealtimes fun. Model good eating and comment excitedly to your child when they try new foods.

7-9 MONTHS

Feeding Skills

- Can sit in a highchair and can hold and drink from a bottle.
- Is able to start to eat thicker pureed and mashed table foods.
- Starting to show early munching (chewing-like) movements and will work towards some soft solid foods.
- Remains full longer after eating and will require smaller milk feeds.

Motor Development

- Able to sit independently without support and can use hands at the same time.
- Will look and reach for objects.

What you can do

- Ensure your child is well supported in their high chair.
- Offer hard rusks, teething chew toys or toothbrushes that can help sore teeth, decrease gag reflex and encourage chewing behaviours.
- Let your baby get messy. We often learn to wear our food before we learn to eat it!
- Offer an appropriate baby spoon for your child to explore and play with during mealtimes. You can try pre-load the spoon for them to start to feed themselves.
- Offer new foods in a mesh or silicone food feeder



10-12 MONTHS

Feeding Skills

- Is able to self-feed foods with fingers and may start using a spoon or fork with support
- Eats an increasing variety of adult table foods
- Begins to use an open cup and can drink from a straw
- Ready to try soft-cooked vegetables, soft fruits, and finger foods
- Is able to eat a variety of food textures and tastes

Motor Development

- Beginning to learn how to use utensils during mealtimes
- Can start using an open cup
- Mess is still definitely expected!

What you can do

- Your child may now be distracted by TV, toys or other people during mealtimes. Keep mealtime fun by engaging with your child as they feed.
- Continue to respect your child's fullness cues (turning away, pushing or throwing food)
- Model using utensils and encourage your child to try self-feeding on their own, try to use child-sized utensils. Short thick handles make it easier to hold!



12-18 MONTHS

Feeding Skills

- Increases variety of coarsely chopped table foods
- Holds and drinks from a cup
- Improved biting skills
- Uses tongue well to move food from side to side in the mouth
- Imitates adult eating



Motor Development

- Fully walking and exploring everything, including food!
- Should be able to eat more of the same foods as adults and more easily use utensils.

What you can do

- Continue to structure mealtimes and enjoy eating with your child – as they will imitate your eating behaviours.
- You are in charge of what your child eats; but they decide HOW MUCH.
- Work on feeding skills during play time and bath time (ie. using spoons & cups to practice scooping & pouring sand or water)

BY 2 YEARS

Feeding Skills

- Swallows well from a cup. Occasional mess or dribbling is okay!
- Swallows food well with not too much food lost out of their mouth when chewing
- Chews with jaw movements in all directions (round and round, up/down and side to side)
- Knows the difference between food and non-food items
- Scoops foods with a spoon, with some spills
- Starts to stab food with a fork and bring it to their mouth
- Shows clear likes and dislikes of some foods

2-3 YEARS

Feeding Skills

- Eats the same foods as the rest of the family
- Feeds well with utensils
- Has definite food likes and dislikes & refuses certain foods
- Possibly start to become a “picky eater”.
- Wipes own mouth and hands with a napkin or cloth
- Pours liquids into a cup from a small container



NOTE:

Despite your child being on family foods at this age, there are still a number of high choking risk foods it is recommended to avoid until a child is over 5-6 years of age including whole hotdogs/sausages, whole grapes, popcorn, marshmallows, nuts and seeds and hard candy.

10 TIPS FOR HELPING PICKY EATERS

- 1. Embrace Messy Sensory Play:** Introduce your child to a variety of textures such as rice, dry pasta, slime, shaving foam, and playdough. The more diverse and messier, the better for their sensory development.
- 2. Creative Food Play:** Encourage your child to play with food in imaginative ways. Use purees, yogurts, or other foods for finger painting, or assemble food items into playful shapes and characters, without the pressure of eating them.
- 3. Kitchen Helpers:** Involve your child in food preparation activities. This not only builds their curiosity about different foods but also increases their willingness to try them.
- 4. Positive Food Conversations:** Talk about foods in an upbeat and engaging manner. Bring different foods to the table, progressively moving them closer to your child, and finally onto their plate, all done gently and without pressure.
- 5. Joyful Mealtime Conversations:** Keep discussions during meals light and positive. Share stories and offer praise to build a happy association with eating and food.

10 TIPS FOR HELPING PICKY EATERS

6. **Value Family Meals:** Make family mealtime a cherished occasion. It's a perfect opportunity for social interaction, developing communication skills, and introducing new foods in a supportive setting.
7. **Minimise Table Time:** Shorten the duration your child is expected to sit at the table to maintain a relaxed and pressure-free mealtime experience. This can make meals more enjoyable and less of a chore.
8. **Avoid Food as a Reward:** Stay away from using treats as incentives for trying new or disliked foods. This can detract from the food being introduced. Opt for non-food rewards like sticker charts to celebrate their progress.
9. **Foster Discovery and Joy:** Approach feeding and sensory play with a sense of adventure and fun, aiming to make each meal and play session an opportunity for discovery and joy.
10. **Contact Professional Support:** If you're looking for more personalised advice and support to enhance your child's eating habits, consider reaching out to our specialist feeding team at Newcastle Speech Pathology for expert guidance.

Start your journey to better eating and calmer mealtimes now!



WE'RE HERE TO HELP

At Newcastle Speech Pathology, we're on a mission to support parents to help their children unlock their full potential.

We're passionate about getting kids feeding well early because we know that early intervention supports their development and unlocks opportunities in life.

Whether it's in school, at home, or in the community, everyone deserves to be able to eat successfully and maintain good health.

We provide a full range of speech pathology services to our clients and their families. Based in Newcastle, New South Wales, we offer in-clinic and online appointments.

Contact us today to discuss your child's feeding skills and find out how we can support you in unlocking their potential!

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