

Inclusive Developmental and Therapy Center

Happier Mealtimes: A Home Program for Fussy Eating

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Mealtimes with a fussy eater can feel like a daily battle — the same few foods, the tears, the worry that they are not eating enough. The good news is that most fussy eating is a normal stage, and calm, pressure-free mealtimes are one of the best ways through it.

This program is for everyday fussy or picky eating only. It is not for medical feeding or swallowing problems. If your child coughs, gags or chokes on food or drink, struggles to swallow, is losing weight or not gaining, or eats so little that their health is affected, please seek prompt medical and professional help — those needs are beyond what this home program can support.

♥ Who this program is for

- ✓ Children who will only eat a small, familiar set of foods
- ✓ A child who refuses whole groups, like most vegetables
- ✓ Mealtimes that regularly end in tears, stress or battles
- ✓ A child who is wary of anything new on their plate
- ✓ Parents who feel worn out by the daily struggle over food

⚡ Important — when to get professional help

This is a supportive home program, not a diagnosis or a substitute for an assessment. Please speak to a professional promptly if:

Coughing, gagging or choking on food or drink

Any difficulty or pain when swallowing

Losing weight, or not gaining weight as expected

An extremely narrow diet that is affecting your child's health

Sudden refusal of foods your child used to eat happily — these need prompt medical help and are not what this program is for

☆ Your step-by-step roadmap

Move at your child's pace, not the calendar's — the “weeks” are a gentle order, not a race. Repeat any stage as long as it helps.

Week 1 – Calm the mealtime

Take the pressure and stress out of eating together.

Serve meals at regular times so your child comes to the table hungry.

Sit and eat together with no phones, screens or toys at the table.

Stop asking, coaxing or bribing — simply offer the food and relax.

⚡ **Try** Decide what and when to offer; let your child decide whether and how
this: much they eat — pressure almost always backfires.

Week 2 – Make new foods safe to be near

Let your child get comfortable with new foods, no eating required.

Put a tiny amount of a new food on the table, not on their plate.

Let them look at it, talk about it and simply share the space with it.

Model eating it yourself calmly, with no comment on what they do.

⚡ **Try** A child often needs to see a new food many times before they will try it —
this: just being near it is real progress.

Week 3 – Explore with the senses

Build friendly, playful contact with new foods.

Explore foods away from mealtimes — sorting, stacking or making faces.

Encourage touching, smelling and even a lick with no pressure to eat.

Let your child help wash, stir or serve food in the kitchen.

⚡ **Try** Touching, smelling and playing all count — a child who will lick or kiss a
this: food is well on the way to tasting it.

Week 4 – Tiny, gentle tastes

Offer small, no-pressure chances to taste something new.

Serve a new food alongside a familiar favourite so there is always a safe choice.

Offer tiny “no-thank-you” portions and make it fine to spit it out.

Try linking a new food to one they like — a new dip with a favourite cracker.

⚡ **Try** Always keep one food you know they will eat on the plate — a safe bite
this: makes a brave bite easier.

Week 5 – Keep it going

Build lasting, relaxed habits around food.

Keep offering variety, and keep re-offering foods that were refused before.

Stay calm and neutral whether your child eats a food or not.

Notice small wins quietly, without turning eating into a big performance.

 **Try** Keep gently re-offering rejected foods — tastes change slowly, and “no”
this: today is often “yes” a few weeks on.

Tricks that make it work

- ✓ Never force, bribe or punish around food — it makes fussy eating worse.
- ✓ Keep portions of new foods tiny so they never feel overwhelming.
- ✓ Keep mealtimes short, calm and pleasant, around 20 to 30 minutes.
- ✓ Offer new foods again and again; it can take many tries before a yes.
- ✓ Let your child see you and others enjoying a range of foods.
- ✓ Involve your child in shopping and cooking so food feels friendly.

How you'll know it's working

- Calmer mealtimes with fewer battles and tears
- Your child willing to have new foods on the table or plate
- More touching, smelling or tasting of unfamiliar foods
- A slowly widening range of foods your child will accept



Is this based on real methods? This program follows the responsive feeding and division of responsibility approach — the parent decides what, when and where food is offered, the child decides whether and how much — with gradual, no-pressure exposure to new foods.