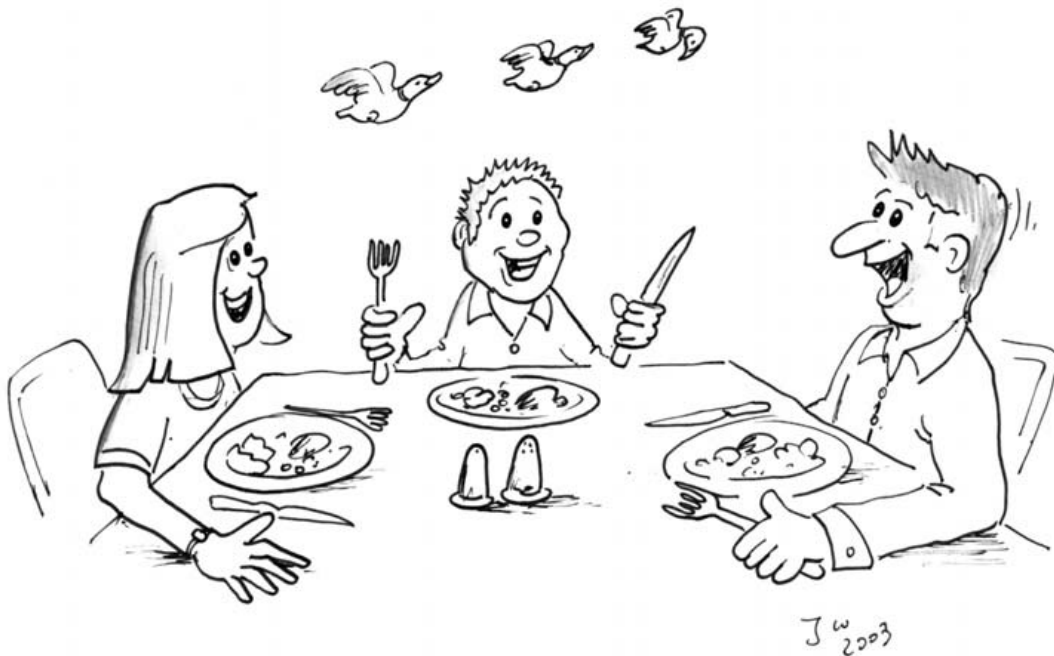


# How to cope at mealtimes

A guide for parents



West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)

## Introduction

Meals and mealtimes can be among the most worrying times for parents and often become a battleground between parents and children. Parents sometimes judge themselves on how well their children eat. The sort of problems most commonly experienced are:

- Poor table manners
- Refusal to eat
- Taking a long time to eat a meal
- Fussy eating
- Not sitting at the table
- Fighting or having tantrums during mealtimes
- Playing with, or throwing, food.

Whatever problems you face, if your child is growing, is healthy and has plenty of energy, then relax. You are probably doing a much better job than you give yourself credit for. It is very common for children to eat a limited range of food. The more you “push” a child to eat, the more likely problems are to arise.

It is also worth remembering that children's appetites vary from meal to meal and from day to day. Every child has a different appetite. Don't expect them all to eat the same amount or the same variety.

It is also important to remember that young children play with their food. This is a normal part of growing up, it is also a messy one! Your child is simply exploring food, playing with new textures, learning how to use fingers and cutlery. You shouldn't stop them doing this, no matter how messy they are, as problems may begin if they cannot learn about food through play.

Most children eat breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, mid-afternoon snack, dinner and possibly a supper. Use routines and cut out snacking between these times.

Mealtimes are an opportunity for children to develop their social skills. Children will learn to communicate by listening and watching their parents, as well as having a go themselves in a friendly atmosphere. Meals can be a time when the whole family can relax

and catch up about the day. It is often the only time that families can get together.

## **The setting**

If you are having problems you may need to think about changing the mealtime routines. The following points are 'ideals' and it is not always possible in busy households to achieve all of them. However, you should try to put into practice as many of the following as you can.

### **Where and when you eat:**

- Sit and eat at a table.
- Have meals at the same time each day (see above)
- Present the children's food in as creative and fun a way as you can. Children's cookbooks from your local library can give great hints on how to make food look fun.

For example, you can make a snail from mashed potato as its shell and little sausages for the tail and peas and carrots for eyes and antennae. You can put a bunny face on a pizza using courgettes for ears, olives for eyes and nose, carrots for whiskers and sweet-corn for teeth. Finally, baked potato halves can be made into boats with cheese triangles for sails, carrot sticks for masts and a red pepper flag.

Let your imagination go wild! Children themselves can come up with great ideas too.

- Have time limited meals, 10-15 minutes for younger children and 20-30 minutes as they get older. Clear plates at end of meal regardless of how much they have eaten
- Between meals, don't give snacks (except mid morning and mid afternoon) and cut out constant drinking, especially fizzy drinks and lots of milk. Dietitians recommend a pint of full cream milk per day for children. Try to stick to this, as milk and fizzy juices can make the child feel full and thus cut their appetite.

## **Make mealtimes a family event:**

- If possible, the whole family should eat together. Children will not suffer if you have to delay the meal for a while until the whole family can be at home
- Have as few distractions as possible, e.g. turn off the TV
- Model good eating, as children learn from your example
- Encourage the children to join in with the conversation. Discuss non-food related topics and ask for their opinions and views. Relax and concentrate on having conversations. A relaxed atmosphere, where you are not commenting on their faults, will help your child feel more like eating.

## **Helping 'difficult' eaters**

### **The picky child:**

- Take a step back. Look at how you and other adults close to your child, approach food and mealtimes. Children will copy eating patterns by observing you and listening to how you talk about food. Don't be surprised if they refuse to eat fruit, when you often say you hate it or you do not eat fruit yourself. If you snack all day, rather than eat meals, your child may learn to do the same.
- Don't give your child lots of choices. It is overwhelming and confusing. You should offer what the family is having plus only one other option your child likes. Do this well in advance to avoid last minute disputes
- Don't give them food you know they do not like or will not eat
- Praise your child when they eat
- Praise any attempt to try something new
- If your child doesn't eat the meal, they will need to wait until the next mealtime/snacktime, even if they are hungry
- **Do not** give into requests for food in between meals. If you do, they will continue to refuse food at mealtimes.

### **The child who behaves badly:**

- Ignore inappropriate behaviour, such as noises, faces and fidgeting. If you pay attention to these behaviours, they are likely to happen more often
- Praise good table manners, e.g. sitting, using cutlery
- Use natural consequences, e.g. if the child throws food, he/she can't eat it and will need to clean it up at the end of the meal.

### **Children who don't eat enough**

#### **Remember:**

- All children have different needs. Just because your oldest child “ate like a horse”, doesn't mean your next one will
- Make sure the child isn't “grazing”. It is tempting to try and “top up” picky eaters constantly. This will stop them ever feeling properly hungry
- Don't allow your child to fill themselves up on juice or other drinks
- Children may be more interested in food if they are allowed to be involved in shopping for, preparing, cooking and serving food
- Don't force your child to eat, the best way is not to nag or comment at all if they don't eat
- Praise any effort they make to eat.

### **Giving correct portions and food:**

- Put small portions on the plate, or allow them to serve their own portions. Children are put off by plates piled with food. It is better if they ask for more, than can't finish what they have. This will also give you the opportunity to praise them and give the child a sense of achievement and pride

- At first, offer the child the foods he/she will eat and then add a very small portion of a new food. You can also encourage them to try a bit of your “grown up” food. In addition, you can ask them to try a spoonful of a new food, one of a favourite food, one of the new food, and so on.
- If they try a new food, give it again at several other mealtimes. It takes a while to get used to new tastes and build up a liking for them
- Experiment with lots of different food, you may strike on an unlikely successful option
- Gradually increase the meal sizes and variety over many weeks and months.

## **Some advice on child-friendly, healthy foods from our dietitians**

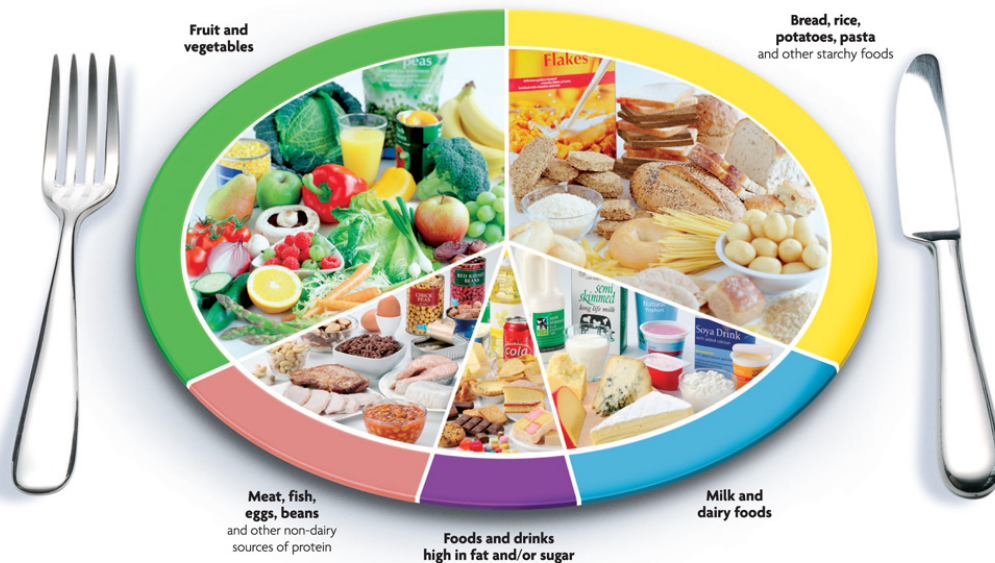
### **What is a healthy diet?**

The best way to understand it is to think about the different food groups – we all need lots from some and less from others. The eatwell plate shows the different food groups and how much we should try to have from each food group for a balanced diet.

If introducing new foods try to make meals colourful and interesting. Try offering new foods in small portions and on a small plate as children can be put off by larger portions. When trying to introduce new foods into your child’s diet there may be food groups that your child is lacking and so you may want to focus on introducing these foods first.

# The eatwell plate

Use the eatwell plate to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.



## Breads, Cereals, Rice, Potatoes, Pasta and other starchy foods

Starchy foods are the body's main source of energy so it is recommended that they are part of every meal.

Keep things varied and try things like crumpets, chapatti, pitta bread, pancakes, crackers and fruit loaf.

Try breakfast cereals with added vitamins and minerals e.g Cheerios, Cornflakes, Rice-Krispies, Shreddies and Weetabix and serve with cows milk as this will count as one portion of dairy.

## Dairy

Milk and dairy foods such as cheese and yoghurts contain calcium for strong bones and teeth as well as protein needed for growth.

Three servings a day will give your child the calcium they need, i.e. a cup of milk (you can lightly flavour milk to encourage this), a yoghurt and a piece of cheese the size of a matchbox.

## Meat, fish and other protein foods

Protein is really important for your child's growth. It is recommended children have at least 2 servings per day.

Meat, poultry, fish and eggs are the best sources of iron.

Vegetarian options include beans, pulses and nuts, these are also sources of iron.

### Fruit and Vegetables

Fruit and Veg are really important for children – they provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.

A portion is roughly what will fit into your child's hand – as your child grows so will their portion.

You can have tinned, frozen or fresh and it can be mixed in a smoothie or served with jelly or ice – cream.

Fruit juices are a good source of vitamin C and 1 glass will provide your child with their Vitamin C for the day

**Top Tip** – fruit juices are best given with breakfast or a main meal because they help with the absorption of iron. All juices are acidic and can cause dental caries and therefore should be served with a meal or a snack.

Some helpful suggestions to encourage vegetables:

- Try adding some vegetables to what they already like i.e in a pasta sauce, with noodles, or mixed with mashed potato
- Try letting your child make their own pizza with some chosen vegetables
- Grate cheese over vegetables
- Soups can be blended so no vegetables are visible
- Allow for finger feeding and cut vegetables into small strips such as carrots or peppers. These can then be used as vegetable sticks to dip into cream cheese or houmous.

### Foods high in fat and sugar

Some example of these foods are spreads, cooking oil, salad oils, mayonnaise, chocolate, crisps, sweets biscuits, fizzy drinks.

Enriching healthy foods from the other 4 groups with ingredients from this group can be really helpful to meet your child's energy needs for healthy growth and development. For example Tuna mayonnaise or peanut butter on toast. Be careful that foods such as biscuits and crisps do not end up being replacements for the other food groups, but rather accompaniments e.g a suitable snack may consist of a cup of milk with a biscuit and fruit pieces



### Structured Meals

- Offer your child Breakfast plus 2 meals and 3 snacks in a day to provide your child with appropriate nutrition for growth
- Aim for 6 – 8 cups of fluid per day  
(Suitable choices can either be full fat or semi skimmed milk, yoghurt drinks, smoothies, fruit juice or water)



Artwork by Nursing & Quality Department (January 2004)  
Updated 2015  
Copyright West Lothian CAMHS 2015