

Practical 12-Week 'Back on Track' Eating Plan

Welcome

Eating well should be pleasurable, but the reality is that many parents are faced with children who do not appear to feel this way. This can mean mealtimes become difficult, tiring and frustrating. It is important to note here that some eating issues are due to specific medical problems (for which you should seek help from a healthcare professional) as opposed to simply being 'fussy'. The problem of fussy eating is not uncommon. In fact, if you have a child who is going through a fussy eating phase, you can be assured that you are not alone.

Teaching children to eat well can be a gradual process. It is important to ensure they are getting the right balance of nutrients. This 12-week 'Back on Track' eating plan has been designed by experts in the fields of nutrition and child psychology to help support you and your child on your journey to enjoying healthy foods and to developing healthy eating habits together.

Be prepared.

As with other behavioural issues, the best approach for addressing fussy eating can be different for different children. The amount of time it may take for a child to try new foods, for example, and come out of their fussy eating phase will vary depending on the child. And, if there are medical problems impacting on your child's eating, professional input is essential.

It is important to recognise the impact that different stages of your child's development can have on fussy eating, as well as your child becoming more sensitive to certain flavours and textures as their taste develops. This knowledge will help you to have more realistic expectations of their food intake and to adapt to any changes, as your child develops. For example, fussy toddlers may simply be trying to assert more independence by saying 'no' to certain foods.

There are many areas of your child's eating behaviour on which you, as a parent, can have a positive effect, but it is important to realise that there might be some aspects of the situation which you may have less control over. However, by following a few simple guidelines, most parents should be able to get their children to enjoy a healthy diet and bring back stress-free family mealtimes. While following this plan, remember that each child is different so your child may progress more quickly or more slowly through the steps. If you find that a stage of the plan does not work for your child, do not worry. Simply start the step again from the beginning of the week and persevere.

This plan has been designed to help you:

- Manage (and enjoy) mealtimes
- Reduce stress
- Understand your child's hunger signals
- Establish a schedule that works for the whole family

Good luck and have fun!

Weeks one to four

AIM: Manage mealtimes, begin to reduce stress and learn to understand your child's hunger signals

Week 1 Understand your child's individual habits and needs

Week 2 Follow a set meal and snack time schedule

Week 3 Help you and your child to learn to understand their hunger signals

Week 4 Make mealtimes a positive experience for everyone

Week 1

Understand your child's individual habits and needs

It is all about observation, assessment and developing a greater understanding, before you change the schedule

- If you are concerned your child may not be eating enough, keep a food diary over a whole week so that you can see what their total food intake looks like. Biscuits, juice and other snacks may be filling your child up and suppressing their appetite at mealtimes.
- Observe your child's appetite at different times of the day. They may just be less hungry at certain times. Also remember that their growth and hunger will go in phases.
- Pay attention to how your child behaves around mealtimes to get more of an understanding of what may be affecting their eating. For example, are mealtimes stressful for them? Are they too busy trying to chat and have fun to eat, or are they attention-seeking?
- If your child is a fussy eater, mealtimes can become very stressful. Step back and look at how much stress occurs at mealtimes. It is entirely normal to feel stressed if your child is not eating enough, as nutrition and growth are clearly very important. However, children can easily start developing associations with food, leading them to avoid or dislike eating particular foods, or worse, food generally. Stress can also suppress digestion and appetite and thus be detrimental to your efforts. Catch your own stressed or worried thoughts – are you worried that you are failing as a parent somehow by your child not eating well? Are you stressed and frustrated by making lots of different meals to tempt your child to eat more? Making mealtimes feel more relaxed and enjoyable for everyone is going to be a key part of this plan, so we will be giving you lots of tips to help with this.

Week 2

Follow set meal and snack time schedule

Help children to learn the consequences of not eating and regulate their hunger levels

- Decide on a time range when each meal will be served daily.
- There should be two to four hours in-between each meal or snack.
- You can follow this schedule for two weeks and reassess the programme and your progress accordingly.

- Adjust the times that you give snacks to ensure your child is not snacking too close to mealtimes. This could help regulate your child's hunger for meals and teach them that access to food may be limited, so if they miss a meal they might feel hungry.
- At the end of the meal, take your child's plate away. If they have not eaten much, support them to wait until the next mealtime or scheduled snack time. Alternatively, you can leave their plate on the side and they can help themselves from it later; but resist the temptation to prepare a different meal for them.
- While you should try to establish set meal and snack times, also give some limited control to your child. A choice between a maximum of two types of foods/meals helps with the power struggle, which can occur with children (especially toddlers). More choice than this can be overwhelming for both your child and you!

Week 3

Help you and your child to learn to understand their hunger signals

Use 'hunger prompts' before each set mealtime. Adjust meal schedule if necessary

- Use 'hunger prompts'. Ask your child before each meal if he/she is hungry and after the meal if he/she is full. Then describe what hunger and fullness feel like.
- Children should be fed when they show signs of hunger and meals should end when they show signs of being full.
- Rather than forcing meals, try adjusting the scheduled mealtimes to suit your child's appetite and hunger peaks.

Week 4

Make mealtimes a positive experience for everyone

Helping your child to think positively about eating and mealtimes

- Make mealtimes fun and sociable. Enjoy eating with your child and model a non-fussy relationship with food. Research shows that parents' eating habits can have a big influence on those of their children.
- Limit mealtimes to 20-30 minutes so your child is responsible for eating during this time period. A shorter mealtime may be easier for them to tolerate and reduce the whole family's stress.
- Give small portions if your child is a fussy eater, so as not to overwhelm them.
- Try not to get stressed, and where possible, do not threaten or bribe your child if they refuse to try a new food, as this can turn mealtimes into a power struggle. An important developmental lesson for children is to eat in response to internal body hunger cues. If parents become stressed with their child, the child may instead learn to eat for external reasons, which can teach them that even if they are full, uncomfortable or ill, they should eat.
- Be realistic about the time spent making meals. Avoid spending too long on this in order to reduce your stress and frustration levels if food does not get eaten.

Weeks five to eight

AIM: Focus on healthy food options

Week 5 Continue introducing healthy foods

Week 6 Incorporate two or more new foods

Week 7 Offer new textures of foods

Week 8 Encourage exploration of healthy foods

Week 5

Continue introducing healthy foods

Nuts, fruit, whole grains, meats, vegetables and dairy products

- Provide a variety of healthy foods to avoid boredom for you and your child.
- Offer a range of colourful foods on the plate and allow your child to pick and choose what they will eat from there. Present food attractively.
- Do not use dessert as a bribe and avoid labelling food as either 'bad' or 'good'.
- Encourage self-feeding and exploration of food and textures from an early age. Try to ignore the mess!
- Aim to give new foods alongside ones they like.

Top Tip: *Introducing new snacks*

Giving your children interesting flavours that go together well and stimulate their taste buds, while also introducing a variety of textures, is a fun way of ensuring that new and healthy foods begin to find their way into their regular selection of foods.

Some interesting combinations include snacks like:

- oatcakes with cream cheese and cucumber sticks
- celery sticks filled with peanut butter
- satsuma sections with cheddar cheese
- melon slices with raspberries
- avocado and bread strips

A good general tip is to use a child's 'favourite' food, like a jacket potato, pitta bread or pasta, and to add different toppings to these familiar foods. For example, if your child loves jacket potato with cheese or tuna, try a different type of cheese or fish like some ricotta or salmon. If they love tomato pasta, try adding some finely chopped black olives and finely grated Parmesan cheese.

'Diluting' the impact of new foods by combining them with well-loved, familiar ones is a doable, step-by-step way of widening a child's range of foods at mealtimes.

Week 6

Incorporate two or more new foods

Creatively introduce new foods

- Try using some techniques to reduce negative food associations and build your child's confidence and familiarity with new foods, gradually. A first step could include just playing with food when there is no pressure to eat it; for example pretending to feed their toys or playing 'cafés.' You can also make this exercise into a game - giving something a lick, trying one spoonful etc. With older children you could do a food quiz together, where they have to try a small amount of a new food and rate it out of 10. At the end of the week, you can then review the scores for different foods together. As children's confidence in trying new foods grows, they may even like to do blindfolded taste tests for added fun!
- With older children, describe to your child how the new eating programme will help them in a range of ways; the first being to help them develop more positive associations with food.
- Remember you may have to offer a new food between 10-20 times before your child accepts it (though they may never like certain foods).

Top Tip: *Fun ideas to try*

Sometimes, simply calling foods by a new name can help to break down barriers. Children who claim not to like peas with their lunch or dinner may find that 'petit pois' are acceptable.

Those who avoid sweetcorn from a can may love it when they can hold a corn on the cob and nibble from this instead.

Taking children shopping can also help to familiarise them with 'new' foods, and tempt them into trying them.

'Bugs Bunny' carrots, that still have their green shoots on, are a bit pricier than an economy bag of carrots, but the 'theatre value' can be just what is needed to get children to give them a go. Once carrots become a familiar part of mealtimes, you can go back to your usual choices.

Trips to farmers markets, allotments and growing your own vegetables, even if it is herbs in a window basket, can help children to get interested in new ingredients. This can make them keener to try, as of course can getting their hands stuck into helping with the cooking.

Breaking an egg to make scrambled eggs, pushing dried fruit into the core of a cooking apple to be baked, or grinding up some pine nuts to make a pesto, can help children to be more inclined to try the finished dish.

Top Tip: *More new snacks*

Continuing the theme of introducing complementary flavours and textures, try these suggestions:

- Ricotta cheese with slices of apple and pitta bread strips
- Mini fruit scone with ricotta and fruit jam
- Fruit loaf with cream cheese and grapes
- Cheese and pineapple
- Dried apricots or sultanas
- Small pieces of milk or dark chocolate
- Fresh apricots and strawberries
- Frozen berry yoghurts

Week 7

Offer new textures of food

Based on your child's feeding skills

- Gradually encourage your child to try foods of different textures.
- Help your child to tolerate having some food they do not like on their plate, even if they do not eat it. It can help to prevent children developing a desire not to have any foods mixed in, or touching each other. Also, sometimes they may forget and accidentally eat the food and enjoy it.
- Talk positively about food and eating in general and always praise your child for trying something new.

Week 8

Encourage exploration of healthy foods

Introducing several new recipes

- If your child enjoys fish, like salmon, why not try making a fish pie, which includes salmon, along with some new types of white fish they have not tried before, like pollock and prawns, topped with mashed potato? It is a tasty and colourful dish, especially if you serve it with their favourite vegetables on the side. Or you can try making salmon into fish cakes using half salmon and half white fish.
- If you have a child who enjoys pasta, try making a very simple, but tasty, tomato sauce, which you can then use in a wide range of pasta dishes from spaghetti bolognese to rigatoni baked in the oven with feta cheese.

Simply lay 1.5kg of ripe tomatoes on a baking tray so that they fit snugly alongside each other, and pour 4 – 5 tablespoons of olive oil over them. Cook in the oven at 125°C / 250°F for three hours for a slow roast. Once roasted, add a handful of fresh basil leaves and blend until smooth. You could add the tiniest bit of salt, to bring out the sweetness of the tomatoes, but this is up to you.

- You can then use your sauce for filling savory pancakes and topping pizzas as well as for pasta sauces.
- Children often like to handle their food. If you have a little one who likes to do this, dishes like turkey or chicken kebabs work well – taking special care with sharp skewers, of course! Thread chicken or turkey pieces onto a skewer with cherry tomatoes, pieces of sweet red peppers and small pieces of red onion then place under the grill for 15-20 minutes, turning regularly.
- Do not forget comfort food! Easy to eat dishes like risotto, with anything from mushrooms to peas or mixed vegetables - such as tiny chunks of carrots and squash, are a delicious and a fun way to introduce new foods.

If your child is continuously fussy and you are concerned about your child's eating habits, you should contact your healthcare professional for more advice and support.

Weeks nine to twelve

AIM: Establish fun, positive family mealtimes and consistently offer new foods

Week 9 Create a 'family table' and model enjoyable eating

Week 10 Let your child take some of the control

Week 11 Offer new foods every other day

Week 12 Offer new foods every day

Week 9

Create a 'family table' and model enjoyable eating

Aim to eat with your child at least once a day and make sure you eat a range of foods

- Reward good eating behaviours such as staying seated and table manners, rather than just focusing on eating.
- Pull the highchair or chair up to the table or ensure the child is sitting at the same level as the rest of the group.
- Encourage your child to stay at the table even if he/she is not eating. Allowing them to leave the table gives the child the message that there is a choice between eating and playing.

Week 10

Let your child take some of the control

- Try to let your child decide how much they need to eat.
- Become aware of the expectations you have of your child's eating habits. A discrepancy between expectations and reality can often cause stress. It can help reduce parents' frustration to realise what their child has actually eaten as opposed to what they have not.

- Reflect on any positive and negative associations which you may have with food and eating. For example, children can pick up on signals that you do not like mess and thus begin to dislike the texture of certain foods which are messy, such as soup or yoghurt.
- Avoid using tricks, such as trying to hide new food in other meals. Be open and honest and encourage your child to try the new food alongside the rest of the family.
- Let your child help to prepare a meal if they would like to. This encourages involvement, as well as an understanding of food quantities and can help to encourage eating.

Week 11

Offer new foods every other day

- Continue to gradually offer new foods
- Try not to focus too much on what your child eats, as the aim is for eating to become 'normal' and relaxed, rather than a focus of attention.
- Try not to feel disappointed or 'let down' if your child has not eaten well.

Week 12

Offer new foods every day

- When offering different foods for children to try, do it in a relaxed, calm way.
- Have friends and other children round to eat – your child may copy them and try more foods.
- Try new foods yourself and find ways to make mealtimes as enjoyable and relaxed as possible.
- Look back on the progress your child has made. Work out which aspects were most successful. Make sure these positive changes become a habit and part of everyday family life!

If your child is continuously fussy and you are concerned about your child's eating habits, you should contact your healthcare professional for more advice and support.