

# Helping Children Eat

## When they have sensory issues and food preferences

This principle “Parents decide what foods to offer, when and where. The child decides whether and how much to eat” underpins feeding advice for families.

There are a number of reasons why some children are more fussy with food. It can make meal time and planning difficult. To eat well, children need to feel safe. Some families will need extra help from a dietitian or speech pathologist who specialises in feeding and sensory issues.

### A parent's role in feeding



#### Set up a regular family meal and snack routine

Eating with your child helps.

Remove distractions like screens



#### Help your child feel comfortably seated

Legs and feet need support.

Use a high chair or booster seat



#### Offer an increasing variety of food over time

It is normal for a child to try a new food multiple times before they will eat it. Remain calm.



#### Allow mess particularly when children are learning to eat

Try only to clean up your child once they have finished eating.



#### Bribing or rewarding your child for eating is not helpful

This stops them from being in touch with their appetite cues.

## Ways to help a child eat enough and more variety



**Most children are naturally in tune with their appetite**

Stress, medications and illness can get in the way. Seek the help you need to manage this.



**Work out what food your child prefers and why**

Can you see a pattern?  
Is it about colour, texture or shape?



**Start to build on this pattern**

Include similar foods eg same texture, colour or shape. Add a sauce, start serving on the side.



**Always offer a food they enjoy at each meal (yes even if it is bread)**

Be patient, change takes time.



**Say “you don’t have to eat it” and mean it.**

The key is to keep trying.  
Don’t set up expectations around timeframes.

## Away from meal time



**Cook with your child or messy play with food**

With no expectation of eating the food.



**Read books about food and eating**

This can help have conversations about how they feel about food and eating.



**Opportunities to eat away from home**

At care, friends or with extended family. Try not to label your child as a fussy eater.



**Shopping, gardening or picking fresh produce**

Exposure to food with no pressure can help your child gain confidence.



**Seek the help you need.**

Talk to your child health nurse or GP. Extra help may be needed from a speech pathologist or dietitian.