

Picky Eating Mealtime Tips: Early-years and School staff

Picky eating is a common issue among children. With the right support at mealtimes to help prevent and manage picky eating behaviours, over time they should start to resolve.

Take a positive, no force approach.	
Trust that if they are hungry they will intuitively eat. It is our role to provide food, but it is their choice whether they eat it . Be mindful that a child's appetite can fluctuate from day to day.	Don't use blanket phrases e.g. 'you need to finish your plate'. Don't force them to try a rejected food. These behaviours can trigger a stress response associating mealtimes with lack of control. Let them follow their gut.
Praise for interacting with foods	
Some 'sensory interactions' deserving of praise before physically eating the food: (1) Having the food on their plate; (2) touching it with their fork; (3) touching it with their finger or mouth; (4) taking a tiny bite or lick.	Let table manners slide if trying a new food (e.g. allow the child to spit it out if they don't like it). Stay calm if the child acts out. Focus on what they should have done rather than the behaviour itself (e.g. they throw food say food stays on the table)
Be patient, offer choice	
It can take up to 20 encounters with a food for a child to 'like' it.	If a child refuses a food, allow them to leave it and try again another week.
Use rewards such as time outside or activities rather than preferred foods. (e.g. don't say if you eat the vegetables, you can eat pudding. It makes these foods more desirable.)	Always provide dinnertime options for children to choose from, especially for those at later sittings or after clubs. This encourages independence so they feel in control.
To make food fun, create stories involving foods. (AI can be helpful here!)	Don't hide foods they refuse into foods they like. This can create more suspicion of foods.
Dinner hall	
Good set up at the table with feet touching floor, and some space to move their arms. (Limit people per table, and per lunchtime session, to prevent overcrowding)	Avoid dinner halls or queues being too busy or noisy to maintain a relaxed environment children are not nervous to be in. Give special consideration to younger year groups.
Role models. Encourage teachers to eat in the dining hall. Try to sit good eaters with trickier eaters as good role models (do not mention this difference in front of the children).	Demystify new foods (where they come from, benefits) and discuss the qualities of the food (e.g. crunchy, sweet) to help them imagine what it would be like to eat it.
Involve parents	
Bring your school cook to parents evenings so that they can ask questions. Make lunch menus available in advance so parents and children can choose together.	Train mealtime staff to understand why it is so important to take the above approaches to prevent mealtime and food anxiety in the future. Be flexible in your approach to each child, factoring in parent's suggestions.

For more information on **Picky Eating** go to

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS website: Feeding and Eating

Disclaimer: Last updated March 2025. The advice has been produced for children who are struggling to eat a wide dietary variety, but are otherwise growing well. If you have any concerns around growth or other issues, please refer to the "When to seek further help" section on the website link above or discuss with your relevant healthcare professional.

Make sure to watch the video 'FEAST: Division of responsibility in feeding' with mealtime staff.

Classroom activities: Incorporate learning about different foods and textures

When children eat, all their senses work together to produce a 'picture' of the food. Children often explore the world through touch, whether that is with their hands or mouth.

The aim with messy play activities is to familiarise children with new and different sensations, so they become less anxious trying new foods. Every child is different and may dislike certain textures at the start. If they start to become distressed, allow them to leave the activity.

Start with dry textures. Once they become more relaxed, try wet stickier textures (such as playdough or paints).

Incorporate foods into lessons such as learning about where foods come from or how they grow. Ensure children get consistent messaging about nutrition both within lessons and at lunchtime.

See more information on the Cambridge Peterborough NHS website - Feeding and Eating.

The following resources are particularly useful to read in conjunction with these tips:

- Healthy Schools Cambridgeshire and Peterborough – Whole School Approach
<https://healthyschoolscp.org.uk/healthy-eating/whole-school-approach/>
 - Clear advice on how to maintain a healthy eating school approach
- Disordered Eating Guidelines for School Staff , Oxford Health NHS foundation trust
<https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Disordered-Eating-for-School-Staff.pdf>
 - A great booklet for ensuring your education environment supports those with disordered eating appropriately, with school checklists amongst many other helpful resources.

Further picky eating resources to have a look into or to direct parents to:

- **Online videos on the Picky Eating course** (free for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough residents): sign up at <https://cap.maximusuk.co.uk/apply-online-today/>
- **Cambridge and Peterborough NHS Website : Feeding and Eating** has lots of information and videos with top tips for parents/ carers to try at home.