

Fussy Eater Versus Difficult Eating Behaviours

Problematic feeding and mealtime behaviours are usually evident from 2 years of age. The ‘fussiness’ or ‘pickiness’ will often be resolved with good role modelling and exposure to different foods. However, if not resolved children are at risk of developing difficult eating behaviours which may continue into adulthood. A limited range of foods and therefore reduced variety of nutrients has huge implications for people, who may then go on to endure chronic health conditions.

You can expect that children will display more than one of these feeding and mealtime behaviours.

| <i>Defining Characteristic</i> | <i>Fussy Eater</i> | <i>Difficult eating behaviour</i> |
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| Number of foods consistently being eaten when presented | Typically eats small selection of foods each day from 20 or more different foods. | Typically eats small selection of foods each day from a range of 15 or less foods. |
| Sensory preferences | Often has moderate sensory seeker or sensory avoider tendencies, with flavours or textures. | Sensory sensitivity profile is likely to be more extreme and include both sensory seeking and sensory avoider traits. |
| Ability to eat foods from all categories of foods (texture and nutrition) | Consistently refuses a range of foods. Overall intake remains adequate for growth. Increased risk of micronutrient deficiencies. | Consistently refuses to eat a range of foods. Regularly refuses whole food groups. High risk of macro and micronutrient deficiencies. |
| Tolerance of new foods on their plate | Can tolerate new foods on their plate; usually able to touch or taste food (sometimes reluctantly). | Complete refusal for any new foods presented... unless their idea. |
| Anxiety around food and mealtimes | Prefers not to talk about food choices, tantrums are common. Apprehensive to try new foods but over time can be reassured and be encouraged to taste. | Becomes fearful of new foods and more anxious when food is talked about. May feel sick, nauseous, get tummy pains or be aggressive at mealtimes. |
| Preference for favourite ‘safe’ foods | A reliance of their ‘safe’ foods for most of their daily diet. Requests the same favourite food. Can reluctantly adapt if the requested food is not available. Favourite foods change over time. | Requests same favourite food at every meal, diet becomes extremely limited. May tantrum and is unable to cope if food requests are not met. Their ‘safe’ foods are predictable, and known not to cause digestive discomfort |

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| <p>Length of mealtimes</p> | <p>Mealtimes are prolonged (longer than 20 -30 minutes) if child is distracted, tired or if given non preferred foods.</p> <p>Plays with food but will eat with some encouragement.</p> | <p>Mealtimes are consistently longer than 30 minutes, even without distractions.</p> <p>They need regularly prompts to eat reducing mealtime enjoyment for parent & child.</p> |
| <p>Food variety in daily food choices</p> | <p>Foods lost due to 'burn out' from 'food jaggging' are usually eaten again after a 2 or 3 week break.</p> | <p>Food lost due to 'food jaggging' are not eaten again, even after a break, resulting in a decrease in number of foods eaten.</p> |
| <p>Ability to learn to eat new foods</p> | <p>Learns to eat new foods with repeated exposures, develops preferences.</p> | <p>Preferences become obsessions; other foods are rejected completely.</p> |
| <p>Ability to eat the same foods as their family</p> | <p>Frequently eats a different meal from other family members.</p> <p>Normally eats with family at the same table.</p> | <p>Almost always eats differently than their family, often eats at a different time or different place than family.</p> |
| <p>Duration and reports of pickiness</p> | <p>Will gradually increase the variety of foods with exposure, especially exposure from peers e.g. kindy.</p> | <p>Persistently refuses to increase variety of foods without supported (therapy) interventions.</p> |