



Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust

Mealtime strategies and food exploration: information for families

When your child has feeding difficulties feeding can often become focussed on getting nutrition rather than the enjoyable social quality of eating. This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) gives some strategies to help your child to learn about mealtimes and have some fun experiences with food.

Mealtime routines

Where possible try to sit in the same place for meals. This could be in a high-chair or at a small table and chair. Sit with them so that they have company even if you are not eating too.

Children enjoy structure and routine because it provides them with a sense of security. Feeding schedules help a child to develop regular patterns of appetite and ensure a child is well nourished throughout the day.

In general, young children should have three meals and two to three snacks each day. A mealtime schedule should follow this type of format:

- Breakfast
- Mid-morning snack
- Lunch
- Mid-afternoon snack
- Dinner
- Bedtime snack

Be prepared

Children are naturally curious and like to explore. As a result, eating can be a messy time. When encouraging your child to eat, be prepared for the mess to make the experience less stressful for you.

- Put down a plastic sheet or eat in the kitchen where you can easily clean up.
- Let your child have old clothes or cover them with an apron.
- Have something ready to clean up the room and your child once you have finished. Try not to focus on cleaning while you are eating or playing.

Just have fun!

Praise for positive eating

Ensure there is no stress or punishment for not eating or for taking food out of their mouth.

Praise your child for positive eating and mealtime behaviours:

- Sitting at the table
- Having food on the plate
- Pushing food around the plate
- Picking up food
- Touching mouth with food

- Putting food in the mouth
- Tasting the food
- Biting the food
- Chewing the food
- Swallowing a piece of food
- Swallowing several pieces of food

Praise siblings for positive behaviours too as they are good role models.

Ignore your child and try not to reinforce negative behaviours by making a fuss for:

- Spitting out food
- Taking food out of the mouth
- Licking food and then putting it back
- Throwing food

Be specific about what your child is doing that is good.

- You could say “Good sitting” or “Well done for trying”.

Never force your child if they do not want to try something as it can be very frightening for your child and make them more scared of eating.

Further information and support

Talk to your Speech and Language Therapist or Dietitian for further ideas.

Encourage your child to eat by:

- Modelling appropriate eating by eating with your child but not expecting them to eat.
- Make “yummy noises” while you eat.
- Praise brothers and sisters for their positive eating.

Make food fun and enjoyable by playing games

- Cooking – use real or pretend food and toys to make a meal.
- Restaurant – set up a pretend restaurant and have your child serve the family or teddy food to eat.
- Tea parties – use toy tea sets to have a tea party with dolls and teddy bears using real or pretend food
- Involve your child in preparing food – for example, finding fruit or vegetables at the shops and/or putting foods away when you get home