

# My Child Still Won't Eat

A guide for parents and health care professionals



# My child still won't eat

Are you concerned about your young child's eating behaviour and slow or uneven weight gain?

This booklet is designed to be used by parents with health care professionals along with the leaflet 'Help, My Child Won't Eat!'

## Is your child:

- refusing to eat?
- getting upset at mealtimes?
- eating very small amounts?
- playing up at mealtimes?
- often miserable or poorly?

## Have mealtimes become:

- a battle?
- very long?
- frustrating and stressful?
- worrying?
- non-existent?

These things happen in most families at some point, but if they have been happening regularly for several weeks and you answered 'yes' to a number of the questions listed, then your child may have a feeding difficulty.



A feeding difficulty is different from faddy eating and doesn't usually go away by itself. It often means that children are eating too little to grow and develop as expected. For families who have a child with feeding difficulties, food and mealtimes often become unpleasant and uncomfortable experiences for everyone. So for things to be different, eating needs to be more enjoyable.

This booklet suggests ways to help you make this happen.

Comments from parents and carers who have successfully sorted out their young child's feeding difficulties:

"You need the right sort of information and support – not just general advice"

"You aren't the only ones and with persistence it can get better"

"We thought we were the only ones – it was such a relief to know that other people were also struggling to feed their children"

"It isn't your fault – you must not blame yourself"

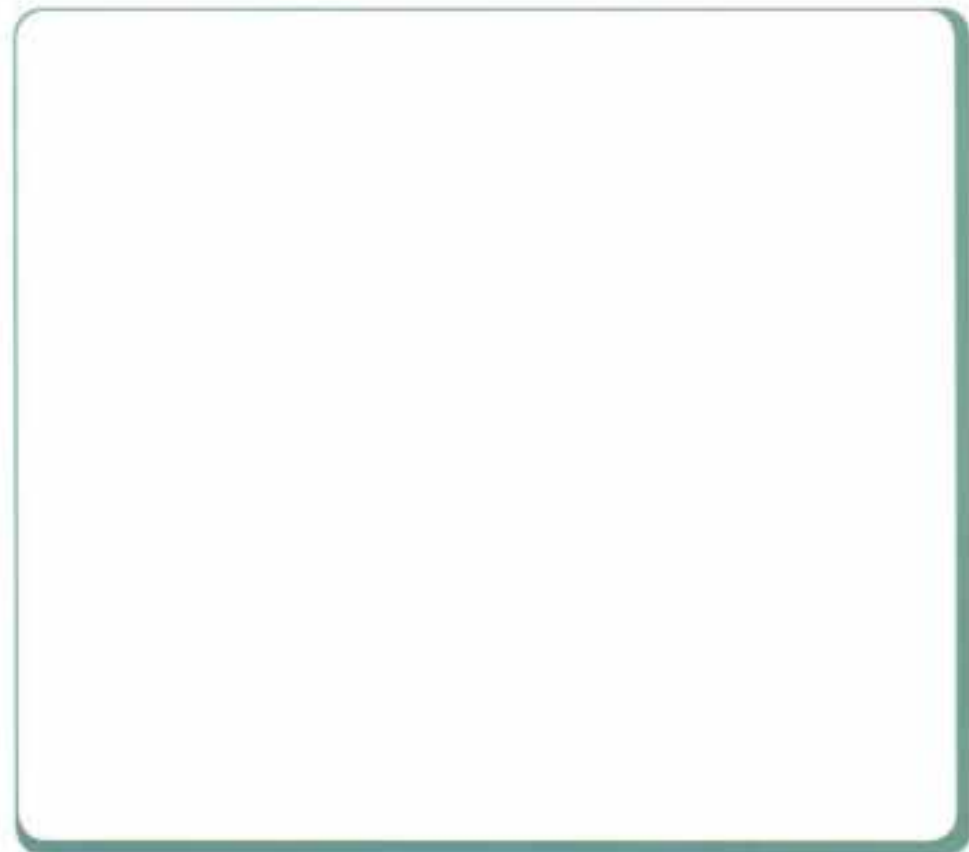


# How would you like things to be?

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When you are beginning to plan changes it is helpful to be as clear as possible about how you would like mealtimes to be.

- Do you want your child to be feeding themselves?
- Who do you want to be there at mealtimes?
- Where do you want everyone to sit?
- Where do you want your child to sit?
- How long do you want a mealtime to last?

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a dark green border, intended for the user to write their responses to the questions listed above.

# Getting ready to make changes...

Think about the following questions to give yourself some clues about what you could do differently at mealtimes. It's important to take account of your child's stage of development when you consider your answers. It can be helpful to talk about the questions with your partner or anyone else who helps care for your child.

*Are there distractions around which prevent your child from concentrating on their food?*

- Is the TV or DVD on?
- Are you playing games together?
- Does your child have things to play with at mealtimes?
- Are there other people around who are not eating?



# Getting ready to make changes...

Early in their development, very young children can only concentrate on one thing at a time. If you want them to pay attention to their food and eating you need to remove anything which may take their attention away from this.

*Is your child getting lots of attention for not eating?*

For example from:

- things that you and others say
- things that you and others do
- the way that you and others look



*How does your child know you are pleased with him or her?*

*What could you and others do or say to let your child know that you are pleased when they show an interest in and eat their food?*

*What could you and others do instead of giving attention to your child when he or she doesn't eat?*



*How can you make sure that everyone who is involved in your child's mealtimes sticks with the same rules that you are trying to set?*

*Who will support you while you are making these changes?*

It would be useful to include anyone who helps care for your child for example parents, grandparents, nursery staff or childminder and your Health Visitor when you are making a plan to manage the changes you have decided on. They may be able to help support you to carry out your plans. Mealtimes will need to be managed in the same way no matter who is there, so that your child always gets the same messages about what is expected of them.

"With two parents, you need to agree between you what you are trying to achieve and write it down in minute detail so it is clear to both of you - it's important to invest at the beginning"



"I was really worried that nothing would change, but making sure that we'd succeeded with one or two small things before moving on to the next helped me see that I could do it"



"I was really impatient to get on with it, but doing things one step at a time really paid off"



# Encouraging your child to eat well

Because parents and carers worry when their child is not eating enough and playing up at mealtimes, they often (without realising it) give them lots of attention when he or she is not eating.

Children are more likely to carry on doing things which get noticed even if the attention is you being cross or fed up with them. Talking to someone else about your worries, in front of your child, is also a kind of attention.

It's important to give your child attention for the type of behaviour you want so that they will behave in that way more often.

The types of behaviour which don't get attention are likely to happen less as time goes by. You might need to start giving praise and attention when your child sits still or stops crying because until he or she does these things, there is little chance that they will eat. Then try to give lots of praise and attention when your child shows any kind of interest in their food.

Try not to give attention when your child is not showing interest in their food. This just means that your child has noticed that things are changing and is trying to get you to go back to doing things the old way. If you can stick to the new way – it works!

"Look at you! In your chair already, that was quick. Good girl!"

"You've eaten all your rice and peas – aren't you good!"

In order to get the behaviour you like, you need to praise the behaviour you like and ignore the behaviour you don't like.





Young children like to please their parents and carers. When they see you are pleased with something they've done, they are likely to do it again. So it's important to be really clear about what has pleased you when you are praising your child.

This type of praise really works in encouraging the behaviour you want from children. If your child is at an appropriate age, you could also use a sticker reward chart to encourage your child to try new foods.

Not everyone finds it easy to give praise and it may feel a bit odd or false to praise your child like this.

Some people have found that it helps to practise how to praise with their partner or a friend.

Remember that as well as the words you say, praise and attention includes looking at your child, smiling at your child and letting them hear you telling someone else how pleased you are.

"At first I felt really silly when I had to praise my little boy – but then I thought 'there's only him and me to hear it and if it's going to help I'll do it'. And it did help, and gradually I got used to doing it"

