Fussy eating

Understanding the reasons, reducing mealtime stress and building positive eating experiences at home

Lucy Luff · Speech and Language Therapist · Arbour Vale School · 24th September 2026

Arbour Vale School

WELCOME

Today is a pressure-free zone — for you, too

1. **No judgement**
   Every family's mealtimes look different. There is no "perfect" way to feed a child.

2. **Join in your way**
   Take part as much or as little as you like — including the hands-on food activity.

3. **Share what feels right**
   What's shared about families in the room stays in the room.

What we'll cover today

01 Welcome and getting started

02 Why children may become fussy eaters

03 Three principles that make a difference

04 The steps to eating

05 Setting up calmer mealtimes

06 Food chaining: small steps to new foods

07 Next steps, extra support and questions

ACTIVITY 1

The food I still won't eat

1. Turn to the person next to you.
2. Share one food you disliked as a child — or still avoid now.
3. What is it about that food? The taste, texture, smell, look — or a memory?
4. How would you feel if someone insisted you ate it?

THINK ABOUT IT

Most adults have a food they avoid — and nobody makes us eat it.

Picky, fussy, kids that won't eat: why?

Premature birth

Developmental issues

Negative experiences

Medical reasons

Fussy or picky phases are normal—but persistence is not

WHY IT HAPPENS

Six common reasons behind fussy eating

Sensory

Taste, texture, smell, temperature or look can feel overwhelming — mixed textures especially.

Oral motor skills

Biting and chewing can be hard work, so children stick to easier foods.

Physical discomfort

Reflux, constipation, sore teeth, illness or tiredness make eating unpleasant.

Past experiences

Gagging, choking, vomiting or being pushed to eat can leave a lasting worry.

Control and independence

Food is one of the few things a child can truly say “no” to.

Routine and environment

Grazing, noisy or rushed meals and poor seating affect appetite and focus.

WHAT IS FUSSY EATING?

Fussy eating is common, and often a normal stage of development

Awariness of new foods

Called food neophobia. It often peaks between about 2 and 6 years.

A protective instinct

Caution with new food may have helped young children avoid harm.

Usually eases with time

Most children widen their range through calm, repeated, pressure-free experiences.

For children with additional needs, sensory differences, motor skills, communication and anxiety can make eating harder — and fussy eating may last longer. That's not a failure; it just means smaller steps.

COMMON BELIEFS

Mealtime myths

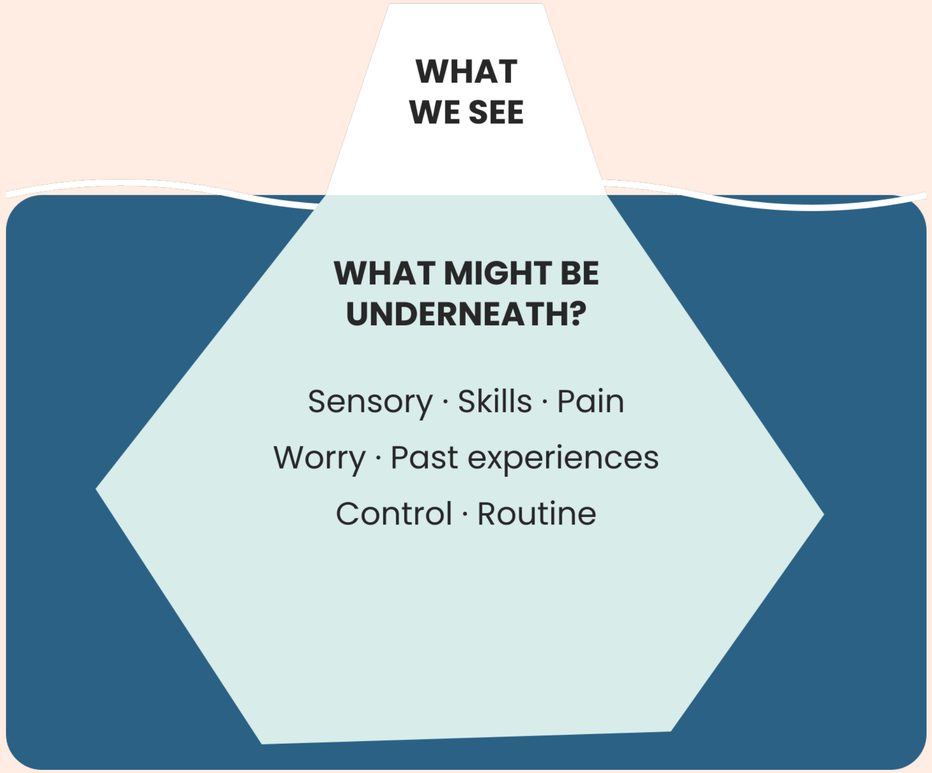
- Eating is the body's number 1 priority
- If a child is hungry enough, they will eat
- Eating is instinctive
- Children only need to eat 3 times a day
- Eating is easy
- If a child won't eat they have a behavioural or organic problem
- Eating is a 2-step process: sit down and eat
- Certain foods can only be eaten at certain times of the day
- You shouldn't play with your food
- Children are to 'mind their manners' at mealtimes

Fussy eating is communication.

There is always a reason behind it. Our job is to get curious about the reason —not to win the battle.

ACTIVITY 2

The mealtime iceberg



1. Choose one mealtime behaviour you see at home.
2. Write it on the tip of your iceberg.
3. On sticky notes, add every reason that might sit underneath it.
4. Share one surprising idea with the room.

You'll need: an iceberg template per table, pens and sticky notes

PRINCIPLE 1

Share the job: you decide the what, when and where

Your job

What food is offered

When meals and snacks happen

Where eating takes place

Your child's job

Whether they eat

How much they eat

Which foods on the plate they choose

When everyone sticks to their own job, trust grows and mealtime battles shrink.

Based on Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding

PRINCIPLE 2

Take the pressure off—even the gentle kind

Pressure can look like…

- “Just one more bite”
- Praising or rewarding a child for eating
- Pudding only if the plate is finished
- Hiding foods, then revealing them
- Watching or commenting on every mouthful

WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Children pressured to eat a food tend to eat less of it, and like it less over time.

Rewarding a child for eating a food can make that food seem less appealing—and the reward more so.

PRINCIPLE 3

New foods need many calm, repeated chances

8 – 15

Research suggests many children need around this many tastes before they accept a new food. Some need many more — and that's okay.

Every contact counts

Seeing, touching and smelling a food are all exposures — even when nothing is eaten.

Tiny and alongside

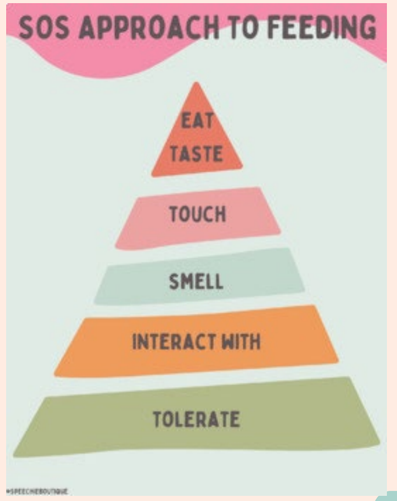
Offer a very small amount.
Consider a "learning plate"

Offer without expecting

Keep serving it, calmly, without asking your child to eat it.

THE STEPS TO EATING

Every step up the stairs is a success



10 Chews and swallows

9 Chews and spits out

8 Bites and spits out

7 Licks it

6 Touches it to lips

5 Smells it

4 Touches it

3 On their plate

2 On the table

1 In the room

Adapted from the steps to eating in Dr Kay Toomey's SOS Approach to Feeding

ACTIVITY 3

Food explorers: climb the steps yourself

1. Uncover your table's tray of foods.

Check allergies

2. Explore each one: look, touch, squash, snap, smell—taste only if you want to.

3. Describe it using only sensory words—no "yummy" or "yucky".

4. Notice which step you stopped at for each food, and why.

TALKING ABOUT FOOD

Use food words, not judgement words

How it feels

crunchy · crispy · soft · squishy · smooth · lumpy · chewy · slippery · sticky

How it tastes

sweet · salty · sour · bitter · mild · tangy · spicy · plain

How it looks and smells

bright · shiny · bumpy · round · warm · cold · strong smell · fresh

INSTEAD OF

“Mmm, yummy! Isn’t it good?”

TRY

“This apple is crunchy and cold.”

AT HOME

Six ways to set up calmer mealtimes

A predictable routine

Regular meals and snacks, about 2–3 hours apart, with a clear start and finish.

Eat together

Children learn by watching you calmly eat and enjoy a range of foods.

Always a safe food

Include at least one food your child usually eats.

Tiny portions

A small amount of a new food feels less overwhelming.

Let them serve

Shared dishes or a “learning plate” give choice without pressure.

Comfortable and calm

Feet supported, fewer distractions, about 20–30 minutes at the table.

ACTIVITY 4

Swap the phrase

Rewrite each phrase so it takes the pressure off but keeps the warmth.

“Just try one bite.”	Your swap…
“Eat your vegetables and you can have pudding.”	Your swap…
“Good girl for eating your peas!”	Your swap…
“But you liked this last week!”	Your swap…
“You’re such a fussy eater.”	Your swap…

SOME POSSIBLE SWAPS

Support the experience, not the eating

Instead of...	Try...
“Just try one bite.”	“You don’t have to eat it. You can touch it or smell it if you’d like.”
“Eat your vegetables and you can have pudding.”	Serve a small pudding as part of the meal, with no conditions.
“Good girl for eating your peas!”	“You rolled the pea! What does it feel like?”
“But you liked this last week!”	“That’s okay. Some days we feel like different foods.”
“You’re such a fussy eater.”	“You’re still learning about this food.”

FOOD CHAINING

Build out from the foods your child already eats

SAFE FOOD
Favourite brand of plain crisps

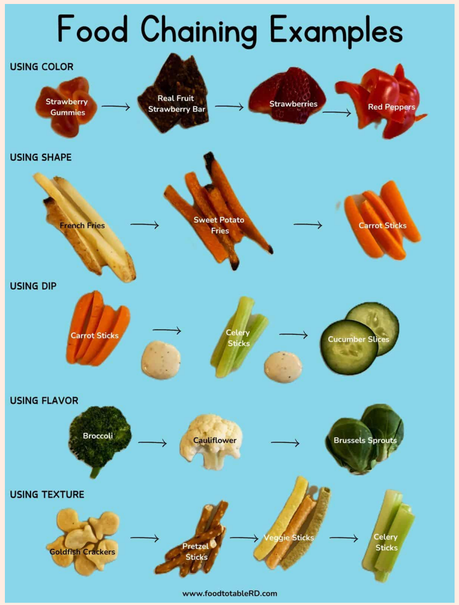
→ **NEW BRAND**
A different brand of plain crisps

→ **NEW SHAPE**
Plain potato hoops or stacked crisps

→ **NEW FORM**
Crispy oven chips, cut thin

→ **NEW TEXTURE**
Crispy roast potatoes

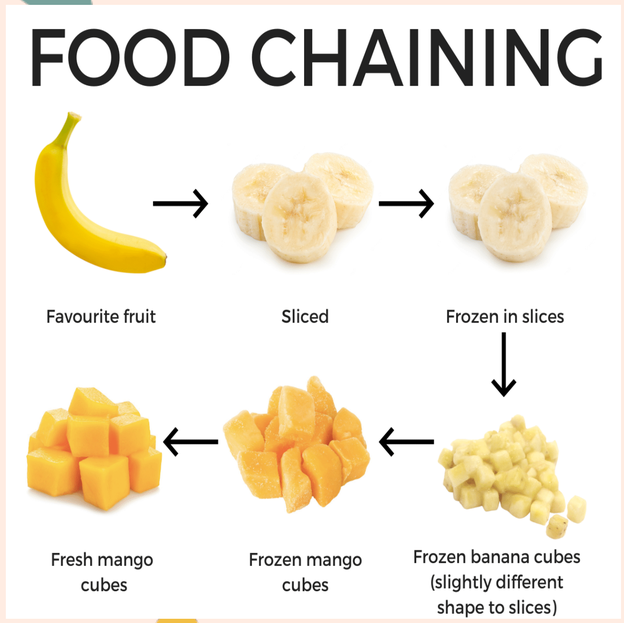
Change one small thing at a time — brand, shape, flavour, colour or texture — so each new food feels familiar.

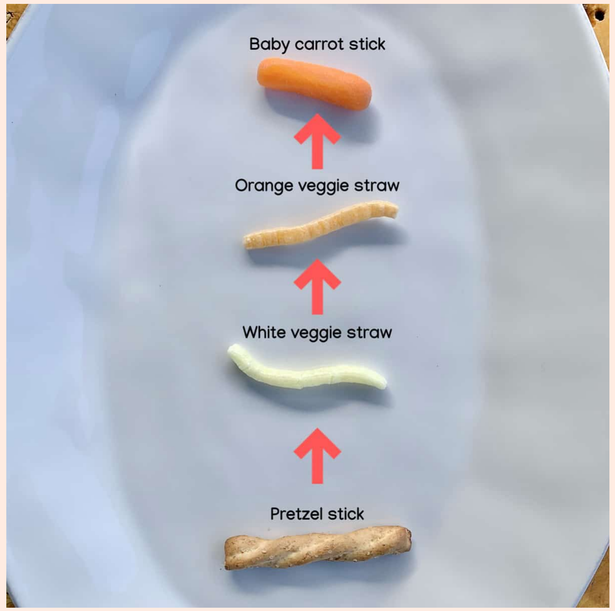


Based on the food chaining approach developed by Cheri Fraker and colleagues

FOOD CHAINING

Build out from the foods your child already eats

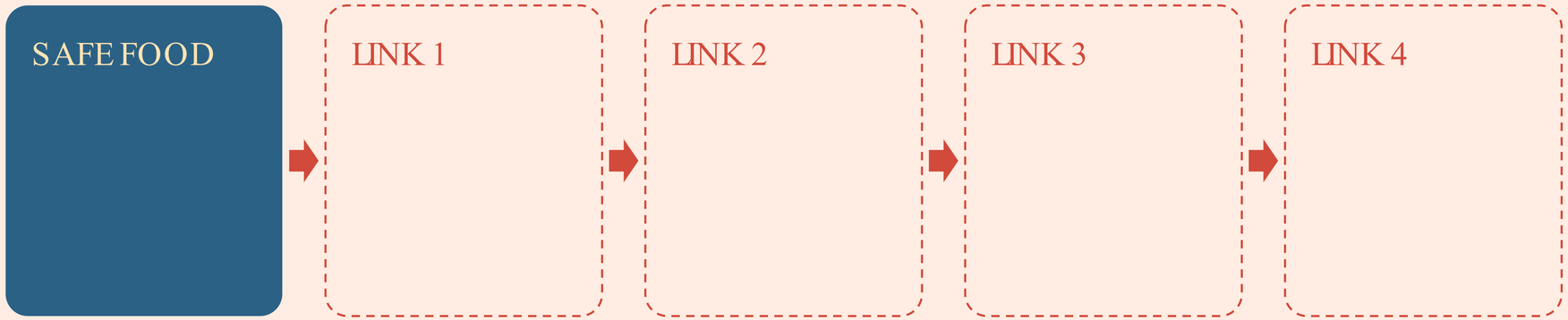




ACTIVITY 5

Build your child's food chain

1. Pick one food your child reliably eats.
2. Change one thing at a time to make 3 or 4 links.
3. Circle the one link you could offer this week.



You'll need: a food chain worksheet and a pen for each parent

AWAY FROM THE TABLE

Some of the best food learning happens away from meals

Messy play

Squash, pour, stamp and paint with food — no need to eat it.

Cooking together

Washing, stirring and tearing are safe ways to handle new foods.

Shopping and growing

Choosing fruit or growing cress builds curiosity about food.

Stories and play

Food books, songs and pretend picnics make foods familiar.

LOOKING AFTER YOU

Your calm is one of the most powerful tools you have

Think in weeks, not meals

Not every meal will go to plan. Look at what your child eats across the week.

Notice the small wins

A new food staying on the plate, or being touched, is real progress.

Share the approach

Agree the plan with everyone who feeds your child, so messages stay consistent.

You're not on your own

Talk to other parents and to your child's team. Asking for help is part of the plan.

ACTIVITY 6 ·

My one small change

Choose something small enough to start this week. Take your card home.

ONE THING I WILL START

e.g. adding a learning plate at tea time

ONE THING I WILL STOP

e.g. saying “just one more bite”

HOW I’LL KNOW IT’S HELPING

e.g. calmer tea times, fewer tears

GETTING MORE SUPPORT

Fussy eating, or something that needs a closer look?

Often typical fussy eating	Worth asking for advice
Eats a limited but steady range	Very few foods, or whole food groups missing
Foods drop off now and then, but come back	Foods keep dropping out and aren't replaced
Growing and gaining weight as expected	Weight loss, slow growth or low energy
Unsure about new foods, but copes nearby	Extreme distress at the sight or smell of new foods
Occasional gagging with new foods	Coughing, choking, a wet or gurgly voice, or chest infections
Mealtimes are tricky but manageable	Meals often last over 30 minutes or cause real family stress

Worried? Talk to your child's SLT, GP or health visitor. Coughing or choking on food or drink should be checked promptly.

Thank you

Questions?

1. Get curious about the reason
2. Take the pressure off, keep offering
3. Every small step counts

Please complete the feedback form before you go.

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