

## Helping the Fussy Eater

All children can have their moments when it comes to being picky eaters. One day they may love a certain food only to announce the next that they 'hate' it and always have. At the extreme end of the fussy eating scale are children who may eat only a handful of select foods. Encompassed in this behaviour is a tendency to become stressed and anxious around food, which can lead to family meals being one of the least enjoyable times of the day.

Traditionally meal times are a place for family members to come together, to chat, to share stories, to grow and strengthen relationships. Yet when children with atypical eating patterns sit at a table, families can end up avoiding and/or dreading mealtimes. While there is no such thing as a miracle cure to rectify fussy eaters' dining habits, there are certain things that can help ease mealtime woes and turn these moments back to enjoyable experiences.

### ***Which brain***

While the brain is a complex organ it can be beneficial to understand different parts on a surface level. As such, the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for emotions and emotive responses, will be the focus of learning in this article.

The four parts of the limbic system, in their most basic form, work together to produce memories and create automated responses. For example, some of the tasks include the hippocampus regulating emotions and controlling memories; the hypothalamus regulating body temperature and releasing hormones into the body; the thalamus interpreting body sensations; and the amygdala controlling the flight, fight, freeze response.

Our basic need in this world is survival. As such, when something, even if it is something as simple as spinach in a pasta sauce, is perceived as a threat, the brain can go into overload mode. When the brain recognises something as being a threat the limbic system becomes almost like a super-villain, unstoppable and all powerful. The result of the limbic system's interference means that spinach in pasta sauce will be treated as if it is the very poison that will end the child's life.

The biggest catch when working with children whose limbic system is in overload is remembering, especially in the heat of the moment, that it is the part of the brain that has the power to turn down the volume in the rational side of the brain. Turning the volume down results in children not hearing a word that is said to them, even when an adult suggests something that falls in their favour. As such, bribes, reasoning for one more bite before desert, threats to stay seated until the food is eaten etc. rarely produce results.

Making matters worse is that every time a child experiences negativity around food, even if they are the ones that have seemingly started it, ensures the child's hippocampus holds tight to the adverse memories. Holding tight to such memories often results in the hippocampus bringing up these memories every time food is served. Unfortunately, where negative memories exist more resistance to food will typically follow.

Given the above, it is easy to see why children and adults who have had battles with food continue to experience ongoing and often escalated negative reactions to mealtimes. With this in mind, attention will now turn towards discussing ways to undo the child's negative reactions to mealtimes.

### ***It is all about the relationship***

If we look beyond our basic survival needs and into the other tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, relationships are everything. The need to belong, to feel loved and to establish secure relationships has been proven to increase individuals' paths to success in all facets of life. If we are to hold tight to this reasoning it is not hard to see why establishing positive relationships around food is of equal benefit.

It might be tempting to think of positive relationships around food as being positive conversations about the food being served, but it is not. Instead it is simply about relationships and conversations about things other than food. While the food might be on the table, taking the focus off the food and directing it towards smoother waters such as a child's interests or daily experiences helps to take the pressure off the child's (and adult's) limbic system. When there is less pressure there is less cause for the limbic system to be triggered. The knock on effect from positive conversations will help the hippocampus create newer, healthier memories around food and mealtimes.

### ***A note about grazing***

Some children (and adults) are natural grazers. While grazing can be a way of making sure food and their subsequent nutrients are consumed, it means that the body finds it difficult to detect when it is hungry. Added to this matter is that grazers will be less likely to tolerate mealtimes because eating on the go in small portions is what the accepted norm is for them.

### ***What to eat and when***

Establishing a routine can often help develop hunger patterns and help children to identify actual hunger needs. Avoiding snacks at non-routine times and/or snack foods that act as fillers, for example, dairy, can also support children to be hungry and eat at set mealtimes. Finding a steady and reliable pattern and sticking to it, for example, if children are going to be hungry between school time and dinner time, offering food that fills the hole for an hour or two would likely work better than food stuff that fills stomachs for five plus hours.

Snacking outside the allotted hours of an eating routine is rarely recommended as it teaches children that food is only on offer at certain times. This consistency helps put children's minds at ease as to when food is going to be on offer. It also means that their limbic system can take a break from worrying about when the next mealtime is going to be, thus meaning that they will be more likely playing and running about, building up an appetite rather than sitting about worrying about it.

### ***Coercion, negotiation and one more bite***

Adults will often try a range of tactics to get children to eat. Coercing children by telling them that something good will happen to them if they eat, bribing and/or threatening the child with dessert or no dessert, or negotiating just one or two more bites so that they can get up from the table are typical examples. Interestingly, these are all tried and trusted techniques used by adults worldwide. Yet surprisingly, they are tactics that require a repeated battle, frequently on a daily or every meal basis. Any technique that fails over and over again (minus the typical allowance given for implementing a new technique (usually a several month period)) suggests that the child's limbic system is still getting in the way. Effectively, if a limbic system is still running the show then results are unlikely to change.

An alternative to telling the child how much to have is to let the child tell you how much they are going to eat. Giving a child the power of this decision helps to keep them in their rational part of their brain, keeping the limbic system at bay. When children are not feeling pressured it allows the hypothalamus to make rash decisions when sending signals regarding a child's hunger levels.

The above suggestion is not recommending that foods children do not like skip an appearance on their plate, but rather that there is no mention of them or that they need to be eaten. Instead, the goal is to get the child's limbic system to learn not to respond to unlikeable foods being on their plate. Once this goal is achieved then the likelihood of a child's willingness to try other, more varied food stuffs will likely improve.

**A QUICK, ADDITIONAL NOTE:** Lack of food consumption triggers genuine fear in adults, most revolving around children getting enough nutrients. Genuine concerns about a child's nutritional intake should be taken seriously and a medical professional should be seen to address any such fears.

### ***Congratulations and applauds***

Congratulating children for their efforts needs to come with a 'proceed with caution warning'. While some children may lap up such positive recognition others will not. It is the children who do not that will see any congratulations as a disguised way of pressuring them to eat again in the future. For these children congratulating them on their efforts or even stating the obvious such as, "See you did like it", might be enough to stall future progress. As always, the idea is to prevent the limbic system from having an emotive response, meaning that no acknowledgment of the child's efforts may be best.

### ***Children's attempts to put focus back on the food***

When any behavioural pattern changes it is common for someone to try and reignite the old pattern. Old patterns, even ones that are not functional, feel familiar and create a greater sense of security than the unknown. Wanting things to feel normal means that children will often try to divert conversations back to food and how much they have to eat. These instances are often best dealt with replies that divert it away again. For example, if a child states they do not like carrots and broccoli, a reply such as, "That's okay. Eat what you do like," before returning the conversation to other topics will help reassure the child's limbic system that there is not some masterful trick around the corner, ready to make them eat those dreaded vegetables.

### ***What does all of this mean?***

Logic dictates that the less a child sits in their limbic system the more compliant they will become. When children feel like they have control they will focus less on what and how much to eat, allowing them to direct their focus on building a positive relationship with others in the presence of food. These positive memories will be the building blocks to making long-lasting, permanent change in children's eating patterns.

Unfortunately for the adults trying to encourage children to eat, children's eating habits will not change overnight. The first step towards change is to help children to trust eating environments. Trust is best built around conversations that do not make food or food consumption the focus topic. Instead, conversations about children's lives and interests will help build new, positive mealtime memories. Refraining from congratulating their efforts when they do eat also helps create pathways for change.

At times children will try to divert conversations to focus on the food. Answering their questions in non-coercive, non-pressured ways without bribes, threats or promises will help to reinstate new memories in their hippocampus, meaning they will come to future mealtimes with an increased, positive mindset. The eventual result of changing the way children and adults interact around food assists children to keep their guard down and, in time, pop in those never before taken bites.

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