



HOT TOPIC FOOD

My daughter is 8 years-old and has lived with us since she was two. She has always been a bit fussy over food but recently it has become more of a problem. She now won't eat any bread,

Q breakfast cereal or most fruit and vegetables and will only eat a certain make of cheese and ham. Given a choice she will eat a lot of sweet things. I try not to make a point of this but mealtimes and packed lunches are becoming limiting and sometimes my frustration spills over.

A Food and mealtimes can be such emotive experiences for almost all parents. Food represents our love and nurture, our desire to give our children good things that will make them healthier and happier, so when children reject that, it can feel so much more powerful than 'just' not wanting to eat something. Mealtimes can be full of meaning too – perhaps we see it as an important chance to be together as a family. Most of us bring a feeling from our own childhood of how mealtimes 'should' be. And the words that describe children who don't want to eat things are always negative – picky, fussy, difficult – and no one wants their children to be seen as those things. In my experience food can so often be a source of generational friction too, so that fussiness can have stresses about what will happen when we try and go out, or go to visit the grandparents.

As parents, we often need a reminder to look beyond the behaviours of our children to the feelings behind them. It is easy for us to become entangled in the outwards behaviours we are faced with on a daily basis, especially when we are feeling frustrated about the impact they are having on the family as a whole.

There are many reasons why children reject food so let's look at some possible reasons and ways you can help. Your daughter may have some sensory issues – perhaps she doesn't like certain tastes, textures or smells. Perhaps you have noticed other areas where your daughter has sensitive senses – loud noises, light, smells, easily stimulated – all might link up with her changes in food tastes. If this feels like a connection to your daughter's behaviours, you could keep a diary of behaviours and events to see if there is a link. If this works out well, you could reduce and manage the stimulation for your daughter or seek some extra help from an occupational therapist.

Your daughter may be craving some extra attention from you and mealtimes might be a quick fix for her. Children have a brilliant way of trying to find that hook within us which gives them the reaction they need. There could be something in your daughter's history that linked food times with attention and she may be replaying that now due to some worry or concern. If this feels true, you could try 'wondering' out loud (therapists love wondering!) with her about possible reasons. I wonder if we find mealtimes tricky because you need something from me – for example, help the child to feel thought about and have their unsaid feelings acknowledged.

The most frequent reason for food challenges is control. When a child feels unsafe, they will go in to a flight or fight mode. Flight might be a need to not eat and fight mode might be control. As children grow, they realise that they can control their bodies independently – physically and emotionally – and they also realise that they can control other situations, with mealtimes and toileting being the main ones. For example, if a child is feeling worried or overwhelmed, they may choose to restrict their food or drink intake as that might feel like the only area they can control.

If we go back to our reminder – what is the feeling behind the behaviour – for each possible reason here, the feeling can be whittled down to an expression of fear. Your daughter may be worried she will not like the taste or texture of food, that if she gets on happily with mealtimes she might not have your attention or if she gives in to the adults' demands on her to eat, then it might overload her. Your parental feelings might be mixed up in this too – your fear of her becoming unwell due to malnutrition, that she is rejecting something of you or that you are letting her down somehow.

Here are a few more suggestions that you could try at home:

- **Set realistic expectations**

If you know that your daughter will only eat a certain food, then anything else is a win. Try not to make comment on her food when you give it to her or when she eats/doesn't eat it. Keep the conversation at mealtimes about anything else but food and this will help her to realise that she can have your attention for lots of different reasons.

- **Have choices**

If your daughter is feeling worried about control, offering choices is a good way to satiate this. At first, it might be 'this bread or that one' and over time, you might be able to add different types of sandwich filling or meals. Keep it simple so you are not feeling overly stressed either – just make it clear to your daughter that she does have choice and control over what she eats, however small.

- **Keep the feeling in mind**

When you are running a busy house and life, it is easy to feel frustrated when our children do not cooperate. When this happens, practice a bit of mindfulness. Take a few deep breaths, go away from the situation if needed and then try to imagine the feelings behind the behaviour – Is she hungry, tired, need the toilet, need a cuddle, need space..... How can you help her to regulate those big feelings?

- **What do you fancy?**

Involving children in meal planning, shopping and prepping might sound stressful but often it can be a really great help. Allow your daughter (and other family members) to choose a meal each week. They can help you buy the food and prepare it, instilling a sense of pride and control to mealtimes. One day, you never know, they may even be confident enough to do this for themselves and prepare a lovely meal for you!

- **Set the mood**

Part of involving your daughter might be to make an occasion of dinner. She might like to set the table or play some relaxing music. But setting the mood is more than that. Be mindful of your reactions too. When you are calm and regulated, your daughter is more likely to be too. Working together as a team might help you both feel more content.

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