

# Making mealtimes fun

**This leaflet gives mealtime advice and tips for parents and carers of children with eating and feeding problems.**

## Eat as a family

When your child has difficulties with eating, it is easy to find yourself focusing on the problems and not on the enjoyable, social quality of the meal itself.

Worries about meals and mealtimes can disrupt a meal in no time and build up your stress levels. This stress may be picked up by your child and affect how they view eating and trying new foods. One of the best ways to overcome this is for your child to join in family mealtimes. A lot of learning, socialising, and fun can take place at the family table.

## Show good mealtime behaviours

A family mealtime is a together time, a time to get attention from parents and siblings. It is also a wonderful opportunity for learning.

Children can watch how their siblings and adults sit and eat their food, ask for more food, and talk together. Many of these behaviours are routine and predictable. The repetition is important for learning.

## Establish a routine

- **Have a clear mealtime routine, structure, and location** – offer 3 meals and 2 snacks per day. Avoid allowing your child to graze between meal or snack times. Ensure they are not filling up on fluids. To keep their interest, limit mealtimes to 30 minutes and snacks to 15 minutes. For some children a timer or clock can help so that they know they don't have to be there too long.
- **Prepare foods together** – children can learn about different foods and get used to touching / feeling them by helping you prepare meals, even if they cannot or will not eat those particular foods.
- **Clean up** – let your child participate not only in preparing the meal but also cleaning up. Show and encourage them how to clear the table, fill the dishwasher or wipe up.



## During mealtimes

- **Check your child is comfortable** – are they sitting comfortably, can their feet touch the floor? If they can't, offer a step to rest their feet on. Let them eat with their fingers if they find it hard to use cutlery. Limit distractions such as loud noises, bright lights, or television at mealtimes.

- **If your child finds it difficult to sit down** – encourage them to do some movement or activities before mealtimes. This can include jumping on the spot or marching. Placing a wobble cushion on their seat to provide some gentle movement while they are sitting at the table may help.
- **Talk about food** – spend time talking about the foods being eaten. Avoid asking questions that result in a ‘no’ answer.
- **Imitate your child** – help children understand about imitating good meal time activities by imitating their positive behaviours, such as sitting down during the meal.
- **Look for the positives** – try to encourage your child at the meal. Meals are not a time for punishment, criticism or yelling at your child or anyone else at the table. Use distraction techniques to diffuse possible melt-downs. Ignore unwanted behaviour and avoid giving too many instructions. Let your child eat at their own pace.
- **Offer praise** – don’t make the feeding problem the centre of attention. Offer praise for desired behavior, such as good chewing or using their cutlery, although don’t overwhelm the anxious eater.
- **Make it fun** – we learn best through fun. Use your imagination, relax, and enjoy the mealtime. For example, foods can be presented in different shapes or play meal time games.
- **Be consistent** – keep calm and try to stay positive; don’t be drawn into negotiating and pick your battles.



## Further information

- Infant and Toddler Forum <https://infantandtoddlerforum.org/articles/top-tips-for-a-happy-mealtime/>
- <https://www.henry.org.uk/fussyeating/creating-relaxed-mealtimes>

## Contacting us

If you have any queries, please contact the branch of the Dietetic Department where your child is seen.

East Berkshire Community Dietitians	0118 904 3250
West Berkshire Community Dietitians	0118 904 3251
Royal Berkshire Hospital Dietitians	0118 322 7116
CYPF East Berkshire Dietitians	0118 918 0571
CYPF West Berkshire Dietitians	0118 918 0571

**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

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