

Tips for stress-free mealtimes

Before we even take a look at what foods your child will or won't eat, we first need to address the environment in which they are eating. Children respond best when their environment is calm, there is some consistency and predictability and they feel safe. If we think about how we feel as adults, if we are anxious or we can't concentrate with lots of external noise, having a meal is not going to be pleasant. We have the autonomy to decide not to eat or to change our environment. Often a lot of the resistance from children, is that they want to have some choice.

Here are some simple things you can put in place to help improve mealtimes.



Preparing for a meal

Have a 'meal time cue' e.g. give a 5 minute warning, wash hands and get them to help you lay the table. Do this same chain of events consistently, before each meal.

This helps them to feel prepared for meal times.

Family meals

Sitting together is always the best way for your child to get exposure to new foods. This can be very hard with work commitments/busy schedules and I totally understand.

Set some realistic goals for your family and have as many of these as you can. This doesn't have to be at dinner time (the most stressful meal of the day!) You can try a buffet style breakfast at the weekend/picnic/family snack time).



Interaction

Work on meal times being an opportunity in the day for some connection/positive experiences. Children learn to eat and try new foods through exposure and interacting with new food (looking at the food, handling the food, smelling the food).

We know that interactions with food is reduced when children are using screens at meal times. This might be a necessity for some children to feel comfortable to even just sit at the table, and that's ok. However if you feel there is room to reduce screens, see my top tips.





Seating & Posture

It is easier and safer for children to learn to eat when they are sitting in a stable upright position. It is helpful if your child's feet are supported as this makes it easier for them to use their hands to learn to feed themselves. Consider a foot stool, if in a highchair, chairs with a booster seat and somewhere to rest their feet. Grounded feet = feeling safe.

Pressure-free exposure and learning

Have 'self serve meals,' as much as possible, where meals are 'split up' and placed in the middle of the table. e.g. spaghetti bolognese - put mince, spaghetti, grated cheese and garlic bread in separate bowls. Always have 2 foods on the table which your child will eat- if that is cheese and garlic bread, great!

If they aren't there yet, offer them 2 of the foods which they usually eat willingly. Encourage them to serve you your food on your plate (if they don't want to put it on their own). This allows them to interact with the food but there is no pressure to eat it.



How to end meal times

Have a cue/sign for them to let you know when they have had enough of sitting at the table and avoid letting meals drag on e.g. setting cutlery to one side or using phrases 'tummy full'.

Meet your child with where they are at right now. If they can only manage to sit for 5 minutes, build this up gradually. You can get little clocks with timers or use your phone and get them to set the time.

These tips, if done consistently, should help to minimise stress at mealtimes and put your children in the best position to be able to go on to try new foods.

Remember, you will never be able to make your child eat, the more they are pushed, the more they resist and stress levels go up for everyone. Try to keep calm and repeat this paragraph in your head 'I can only offer my child the **opportunities** to eat. By offering them regular meals and snacks and continuing to offer a variety of foods. I am doing the best I can'.

