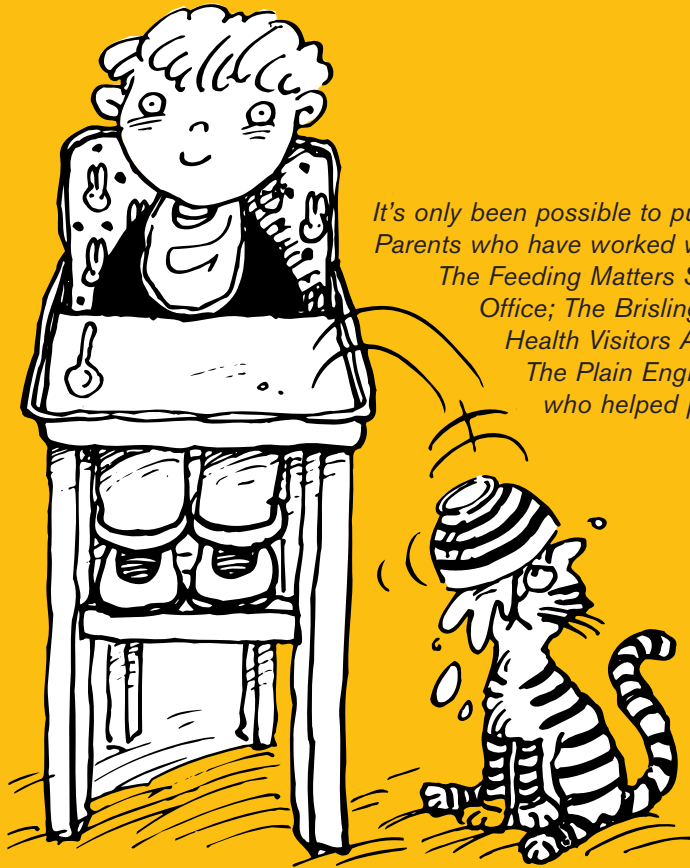


# My child **still** won't eat

*Are you concerned about your young child's eating  
behaviour and slow or uneven weight gain?*

**feeding**matters  
helping children to thrive





*It's only been possible to put this leaflet together with help from the following people:  
Parents who have worked with the Feeding Matters Team; Feeding Matters Staff;  
The Feeding Matters Steering Group; Children's Society Staff at the Bristol Regional  
Office; The Brislington Childminders' Group; The Community Practitioners and  
Health Visitors Association; The British Dietetic Association – Paediatric Group;  
The Plain English Society and lastly British Meat Nutrition Education Service  
who helped pay for the leaflet. .*



## Is your child:

- refusing to eat?
- getting upset at mealtimes?
- eating very small amounts?
- playing up at mealtimes?
- often miserable or poorly?



## Have mealtimes become:

- a battle?
- very long?
- frustrating and stressful?
- worrying?
- non-existent?

These things happen in most families at some time, but if they have been happening regularly for several weeks and you answered 'yes' to a number of the questions on the previous page, then your child may have a 'feeding difficulty'.

A 'feeding difficulty' is different from 'faddy' eating and doesn't usually go away by itself. It often means that children are eating too little to grow and develop as expected. For families who have a child with feeding difficulties, food and mealtimes often become unpleasant and uncomfortable experiences for everyone. So for things to be different, eating needs to be more enjoyable. This booklet suggests ways to help you make this happen.

***Comments from parents and carers who have successfully sorted out their young children's feeding difficulties.***

*“We thought we were the only ones – it was such a relief to know that other people were also struggling to feed their children.”*

*“It isn't your fault – you must not blame yourself.”*

*“You need the right sort of information and support – not just general advice.”*

*“You aren't the only ones and with persistence it can get better.”*

## **How would you like things to be?**

When you are beginning to plan changes it is helpful to be as clear as possible about how you would like mealtimes to be.

- Do you want your child to be feeding himself or herself?
- Who do you want to be there at mealtimes?
- Where do you want everyone to sit?
- Where do you want your child to sit?
- How long do you want a mealtime to last?
- How many courses do you want to offer?
- What sort of foods do you want to offer?
- When do you want to offer drinks?

*“You have the right as a parent to set your own routine at mealtimes.”*

## **What it's like now**

It's important to begin by thinking about what actually happens at the moment. It may help to put yourself 'in your child's shoes'.

- Is there a regular pattern to meals?
- How often do you offer food and drink (through the night as well as during the day)?
- Is your child having lots to drink?
- Does your child know **when** to eat and **what** to do?

- Does your child know **how** to do what you want him or her to – (for example, use a spoon or put food into his or her own mouth)?
- Does your child know when you are pleased with him or her?

## Doing things differently

Think about the following questions to give yourself some clues about what you could do differently at mealtimes. It's important to take account of your child's stage of development when you consider your answers. It can be helpful to talk about the questions with your partner or anyone else who helps you to care for your child.

- **Are there distractions around which prevent your child from concentrating on his or her food?**

*For example:*

- is the TV or video on?
- are you playing games together?
- does your child have things to play with at mealtimes?
- are there other people around who are not eating?

Early in their development, very young children can only concentrate on one thing at a time.

If you want them to pay attention to their food and eating you need to remove anything which may take their attention away from this.

- **Is your child getting lots of attention for not eating?**

*For example:*

- from things that you and others say;
- from things that you and others do; or
- from the way that you and others look.

- **How does your child know when you are pleased with him or her?**
- **What could you and others do or say to let your child know that you are pleased when they show an interest in and eat their food?**
- **What could you and others do instead of giving attention to your child when he or she doesn't eat?**

Because parents or carers worry when their child is not eating enough and is playing up at mealtimes, they often (without realising it) give him or her lots of attention when he or she is not eating.

Children are more likely to carry on doing the things which get noticed – even if the attention is you being cross or fed up with them. Talking to someone else about your worries, in front of your child, is also a kind of attention.

It's important to give your child attention for the type of behaviour you want so that they will behave in that way more often.

The types of behaviour which don't get attention are likely to happen less as time goes by. You might need to start by giving praise and attention when your child sits still or stops crying (because until he or she does these things, there is little chance that he or she will eat).

Then try to give lots of praise and attention when your child shows any kind of interest in their food. Try not to give attention when he or she is not showing interest in his or her food. This is not as easy as it sounds, and things usually start off by getting worse. This just means that your child has noticed that things are changing and is trying to get you to go back to doing things the old way. If you can stick with the new way – it works!

Young children like to please their parents and carers. When they see you are pleased with something they've done, they are likely to do it again. So it's important to be really clear about what has pleased you when you are praising your child. (For example, "Look at you! In your chair already – that was quick, good girl!" "You've eaten all your rice and peas – aren't you good!") This type of praise really works in encouraging the behaviour you want from children.

Not everyone finds it easy to give praise and it may feel a bit odd or false to praise your child like this. Some people have found that it helps to practise how to praise with their partner or a friend.

*“In order to get the behaviour you like, you need to praise the behaviour you like and ignore the behaviour you don't like.”*

*“At first I felt really silly when I had to praise my little boy – but then I thought ‘there's only him and me to hear it and if it's going to help, I'll do it! And it did help, and gradually I've got used to doing it.’”*

Remember that as well as the words you say, praise and attention includes looking at your child, turning towards your child, smiling at your child and letting him or her hear you telling someone else how pleased you are.

## **Managing mealtimes**

Young children need to receive very clear messages about what you want them to do at different times. It is very helpful to have the same signals or routines to let them know that it's time for a meal to begin or end. (For example, "When I've put the plates on the table it will be time to wash your hands for dinner." "When we've all finished our drinks you can go and play.")



It is not helpful to leave food and drinks around all day while your child is busy playing.

This gives a mixed

message about what he or she is expected to do – do you want him or her to play or to eat?

- **How could you clearly show your child what you would like him or her to do at mealtimes?**

Lots of children eat on their own or in front of the TV, but they need to see others eating and enjoying their food if they are to learn that eating can be fun.

“Children learn from what they see, not from what they are told – for example, it helped when she could see us all sitting down together as a family to enjoy eating together.”

“To encourage your child to enjoy food, try to set an example and try to make mealtimes an enjoyable social occasion.”

- **How does your child know when it is time to eat, and how does he or she know when the mealtime is over?**

“Children like to know the rules and the limits –

*this applies not only to behaviour in general but also to mealtime behaviour.”*

## **As many calories as possible**

- **Are there any foods that you know your child will always eat?**

When children are underweight and not eating well they need as much energy (calories) as possible in the food you give them. Choose the highest calorie foods and drinks for your child and avoid using ‘low fat’ or ‘low sugar’ foods as these are also low in calories. If there are any high calorie foods that your child likes, regularly provide these at meal or snack times. Knowing that the foods your child is eating have a lot of calories in them can help to reduce stress at mealtimes.

You may already have ideas about how you can increase the calories in your child’s food and you could also ask your health visitor or family doctor for advice – they may refer you to a dietitian for further ideas.

“You have to put to one side what you have learned about healthy eating for adults and recognise the importance of fats and sugar for small children.”

“We needed to know that, in the short term, calories are more important than variety or how to promote good eating habits.”

Young children with small appetites need food and drink 'little and often'. Aim for three main meals a day with a mid-morning and mid-afternoon snack spaced at regular intervals.

It is helpful to offer two courses at each meal. This gives two chances for your child to take in extra calories, and the second course should be offered even if your child has not eaten the first. If the second course is a pudding, remember to make it clear that it is not a reward for eating the first course – it's just another chance to take in calories.

It is also helpful to give your child a small portion which he or she may be able to finish, and so receive lots of praise and attention. You can then offer a second helping.

Research suggests that the best time to begin offering young children lots of different tastes and textures is when they are between four and eight months old. If you have missed this chance you may need to offer these new tastes or textures as many as 16 or 17 times before your child will take them. So don't give up too soon if it seems as if your child doesn't like a new taste or texture.

## **Starting to change things**

Once you have decided on the changes you want to make – think about the following before you begin.

- **How can you make sure that everyone who is involved in your child's mealtimes sticks with the same rules that you are trying to set?**
- **Who will support you while you are making these changes?**

It may be useful to include your partner, anyone who helps care for your child and your health visitor when you are making a plan to manage the changes you have decided on. They may be able to help you carry out your plans. At the end of this booklet there are pages where you can write things down so that everyone can be clear.

It is a good idea to think about which difficulties you want to tackle first. Trying to make lots of changes all at once is very confusing for young children and hard work for you, so decide on some small steps which you can build on later. For example, you might begin with getting your child (and anyone else) to sit in the places you have decided. It will then be easier, a little later on, for you to concentrate on encouraging your child to eat.

Mealtimes will need to be managed the same way no matter who is there, so that your child always gets the same messages about what is expected of him or her.

👉 *With two parents, you need to agree between you*

*what you are trying to achieve and write it down in minute detail so it is clear to both of you – it's important to invest time at the beginning.*”

*“I was impatient to get on with it, but doing things one step at a time really paid off.”*

*“I was really worried that nothing would change, but making sure that we'd succeeded with one or two small things before moving on to the next helped me see that I could do it.”*

Reviewing your plan after a time (perhaps a month) might help you see any changes which have begun to happen. You may also need to make small adjustments to your plan at this point. Don't be tempted to change the plan after only a few days if things are getting worse. Stick with it!

**Remember** – there are no ‘overnight miracles’. It takes time and hard work to make the changes which will enable your child to eat more. It can be done!

*“You can't make a child eat – you can't force it, you can only sow the seeds. You need patience and that will bear fruit in months to come.”*

*“With hard work and persistence there is a way through and your child will eat.”*

If we want young children to behave differently, the adults around them must first behave differently.

*“Parents should retain or take control at mealtimes – eating should be fun (that doesn't mean a riot!) – and control is not a bad thing.”*

When we begin to change the way we manage children's behaviour, their behaviour will probably get worse before it gets better. This is a good sign – so persevere! It means that your child has noticed that things are different and is testing out the new rules and limits.

*“With many small steps you can make a big change.”*

**Think positive!** Ignoring the behaviours you don't want and giving positive attention for the ones you want to increase will help to make mealtimes more enjoyable.

*“We don't dread mealtimes any more – they're peaceful and no fighting.”*

*“He's more happy and relaxed altogether now – eating better – gaining weight, we've got our confidence back.”*

*“My whole attitude to discipline has changed and I shout less. We're all more relaxed.”*



## Action plan

**Remember** – take small steps, and things are likely to get worse before they get better.

**What don't you like about mealtimes now?**

(For example, 'very long', 'a battle!')

---

---

---

---

**When do you offer food?** (Give times)

---

---

---

**When do you offer drinks?**

(For example, whenever he or she wants, with meals or snacks.)

---

---

---

**Who else is there at mealtimes?**

---

---

---

**Where does your child sit for his or her meals?**

(For example, in a highchair in front of the TV, at the table.)

---

---

---

**Where do you (or whoever is feeding your child) sit?**

(For example, next to him or her, you don't sit down.)

---

---

---

**Does your child have the chance to feed himself or herself (if old enough)?**

---

---

---

**What do you talk about at mealtimes?**

*(For example, do you talk only about food and behaviour at mealtimes?)*

---

---

---

---

---

**How does your child know that you are pleased with him or her?**

*(For example, when you smile, give praise and so on.)*

---

---

---

---

---

**How you would like things to be?**

---

---

---

**How long do you want mealtimes to last?**

*(For example, 30 minutes.)*

---

---

---

---

---

**When will you offer drinks?**

*(For example, at the end of each meal, and at snack times.)*

**What kind of foods will you offer that you know your child likes and will increase the number of calories eaten?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Who else will eat at the same time?**

---

---

---

Where will you sit?

---

---

Where will anyone else sit?

---

---

Where will your child sit?

---

---

**What will you (or others) do or say if —**

• your child keeps getting out of his or her seat at mealtimes? *(For example, bring him or her back to their seat and remind them that this is time to eat; think about using a harness to keep him or her seated.)*



---

---

---

---

---

• your child keeps spitting out his or her food?  
*(For example, remember that behaviour which doesn't get attention is likely to happen less as time goes by.)*

---

---

---

• your child keeps crying or has a tantrum?

---

---

---

• your child wants food or drinks at other times?  
*(For example, remind him or her that it will be time for a drink after you've done, and then suggest a new activity.)*

---

---

---

---

● you feel very cross? *(Make sure that your child is safe and then move away, perhaps into another room and give yourself a few moments to cool down.)*

---

---

---

---

**What will you do when you want to ignore the behaviour you don't want?** *(For example, look away – while making sure your child is safe by peeping out of the corner of your eye – talk to someone else about something else.)*

---

---

---

---

---

---

**What will you do when you want to encourage the behaviour you see?** *(For example, smile, clap.)*

---

---

---

---

**What will you talk about at mealtimes?** *(For example, what happened at toddler group, feeding the ducks, what you will be doing later.)*

---

---

---

---

**When will you start on your plan?**

---

**When will you look at how you are getting on and think about any changes you need to make to the plan?**

---

---

---





This booklet is designed to be used by parents with health care professionals along with the leaflet 'Help, my child won't eat' (available from the British Dietetic Association, Paediatric Group), and the professional briefing paper 'Faltering Growth – taking the failure out of failure to thrive' (available from The Children's Society).



Paediatric Group of the British Dietetic Association



[www.the-childrens-society.org.uk](http://www.the-childrens-society.org.uk)

Illustrations by Jan Smith