

## Dealing with Fussy Eaters

When Amy (4) won't eat at meal time When Amy (4) won't eat at meal times, you get desperately worried. Will she become ill? She won't grow and develop if she doesn't eat! You beg and plead with her to eat and still she refuses. Meal times are a nightmare for you as you spend all your time trying to force your child to eat while your dinner goes cold. Amy is in full control, getting loads of attention for a negative behaviour.

You are so anxious that she is not eating you are willing to let her eat anything she wants between meals in order for her not to be hungry. You take her to the doctor who says she is perfectly well and for you not to worry fussy eating is normal. You can change all this by changing your approach. Amy does eat or else she wouldn't grow so the problem is she won't eat when you want her to eat at mealtimes.

You must stop making mealtimes into a big deal. Prepare the meal and call the family to the table to eat. Give Amy small portions of food she likes while ensuring they are healthy foods. Then eat your own dinner. When you are finished ask Amy if she is eating her dinner if she says no then say that's fine you mustn't be hungry and clear away the dinner.

It is easy to be annoyed because you have spent time cooking and money on the food and it is all wasted but it will be worth it. At least you have not had an argument and you have managed to have your meal while it was still hot. Later when Amy asks for a snack you can allow her one but only a healthy food option – no cakes or chocolate. If she doesn't want the healthy option then you can let her know when the next meal time is. She has a choice then to eat the healthy snack or be hungry until the next meal.

It is important to know that children have little appetites and are not always hungry when adults are. They will regulate their own eating habits given a chance. Be conscious of your own eating habits such as are you just having a coffee for breakfast but expect your child to sit down and eat a cereal. Maybe they don't feel hungry first thing in the morning but are hungry later in the morning so they have to be allowed the choice to eat when they feel hungry and not always when we say its mealtime.

The important rule is, however, that they can only have healthy food options. If you allow them sweets and crisps why would they ever choose to eat a healthy food – would you?

It is very important to stay calm and not get into an argument over the meals. If Amy starts to cry and demand ice-cream you have to say '*Amy you can eat your dinner or choose a healthy snack but you cannot have ice-cream*'. Then walk away – do not get into a discussion with her about it. Amy then is no longer getting negative attention for her misbehaviour however you do need to ensure that you give her your full attention for at least twenty minutes every day and praise her when she is doing something well.

Eventually Amy will eat at mealtimes because all the attention over the meal has been taken away and it no longer matters if she eats no one is paying her any attention for this behaviour.

If your child really does not like a particular food then you need to stop offering it to them or else offer it in a different way. If they won't eat vegetables will they eat fruit? There is no rule that says they must eat equal portions of both. Maybe you can make fruit drinks and blend in some vegetables also. If they persist in not eating that particular food then ask yourself what nutrients they are missing and try to find an alternative food which is a good source of the same nutrients.

We all have foods we don't like and children often grow out of fussy eating habits but if you make an argument out of it everyday then it will turn into a very negative event for everyone and the food will still remain uneaten. Most of the issue is your anxiety as a parent for your child's health and you need to stand back and look objectively at your child and you will more than likely find they are healthy.

Sit down in advance and think out some of the strategies you will use when these kind of situations arise. Whether you give a child a limited choice or tell the child what the consequence of a particular action will be you are allowing the child to maintain his/her dignity. The child can choose to be naughty or good and feel they had a part to play in the decision and, since children want to be loved, they are more likely to choose to be good.

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You are so anxious about her not eating that you are willing to let her eat anything she wants between meals in order for her not to be hungry. You take her to the doctor who tells you Amy is perfectly well and that you shouldn't worry - fussy eating is normal.

You can change all this by changing your approach. Amy does eat or else she wouldn't grow so the problem is she won't eat when you want her to eat at mealtimes. You must stop making mealtimes into a big deal. Prepare the meal and call the family to the table to eat. Give Amy small portions of food she likes while ensuring they are healthy foods.

Then eat your own dinner. When you are finished ask Amy if she is eating her dinner if she says no then say that's fine you mustn't be hungry and clear away the dinner.

It is easy to be annoyed because you have spent time cooking and money on the food and it is all wasted but it will be worth it. At least you have not had an argument and you have managed to have your meal while it was still hot. Later when Amy asks for a snack you can allow her one but only a healthy food option – no cakes or chocolate. If she doesn't want the healthy option then you can let her know when the next meal time is. She has a choice then to eat the healthy snack or be hungry until the next meal.

It is important to know that children have little appetites and are not always hungry when adults are. They will regulate their own eating habits given a chance. Be conscious of your own eating habits – for example, are you just having a coffee for breakfast, yet expect your child to sit down and eat a cereal? Maybe they don't feel hungry first thing in the morning but are hungry later in the morning so they have to be allowed the choice to eat when they feel hungry and not always when we say it's mealtime. The important rule is, however, that they can only have healthy food options. If you allow them sweets and crisps why would they ever choose to eat a healthy food – would you?

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