

Improving Variety: The Basics

Learning how to eat is not something we were born knowing how to do – we had to learn it. We learnt tongue control, oral motor skills, how to detect foods with all our senses, what smells and textures we prefer and which ones we don't.

We don't just dislike foods for the sake of it, we dislike foods because of one of our senses. We all have different responses to different senses. For example, you may like pink lady apples because they are juicy, crunchy and sweet. You may dislike cooked cabbage because its bitter, wet and can be slimy.



If you have a child who is a fussy eater, an extreme picky eater or a problem feeder, it is likely they have gotten stuck in learning about foods and need extra learning support to help them understand their tongues, oral motor control and to learn about all their wonderful senses.

The Basics of improving variety provides you with key strategies to have at home to reduce the heightened anxieties and battles that can occur on a daily basis if you have a child who struggles with feeding. These basics are important, regardless of what future training models are provided to you, as children (and adults) who are stressed and dysregulated are not in a frame of mind to learn new things, let alone put unknown and disliked foods near their mouths.

Before any therapies are implemented, we need to **set the mealtime scene** with **The Basics**:

1. Do NOT force feed your child. It creates stress for them and for you. Follow the steps below and allow your child to get comfortable at the table, engaging with foods and the family in a safe space. We will expand on their variety later.
2. Make sure you sit at the same spot every night for dinner, so that there is routine. Whether you sit around a traditional table, around the living room table or wherever is appropriate for your family.
3. Sit together. Children need to learn from other adults, they cannot learn what they cannot see. Everyone needs to sit at the table, even if you don't want to eat. Sitting at the table is an important part of family life where everyone can discuss news and different topics, and it is a wonderful time of bonding together as a family unit.



4. When the meal starts, do not mention food, what's on any of the plates or any topic relating to food. Have conversations about how their day was, any news, any topic that is not relating to food.
5. Allow the child to watch you and the other adults eat and learn from you.
6. It's OK for your difficult feeder to have their own separate meal (we will discuss how we expand their variety later, for now we just need to set the scene).
7. Mealtimes are 20mins, maximum. Do not force a child to sit at the table longer when they have clearly indicated they are done.
8. Food is no longer "good" or "bad". Food is food. Food can be green, orange, wet, slimy, crunchy, cold, hot, spicy, loud. Start changing your language about food. Tell me why you like this food and dislike another. It's not "yuck" or "gross". Get more specific into your descriptions and start to unravel your own sensory relationship with foods so that you can share it with your child.
9. We do not have to finish everything on our plates - let the child decide how much they are going to eat.
10. Dessert is not a reward. Generally speaking, rewards and punishments don't work in children with feeding difficulties. Ensure dessert is a healthier option including fruit, yoghurt or a hot drink and allow them to have it.
11. Cutlery is a very cultural part of western society and is not helpful for learning new foods. If your child would rather use their hands, let them.
12. Spitting out is OK. Again, a strong part of our western culture is to not do this. But it's not conducive to learning. Always have napkins or tissues on the table, teach your child to calmly spit out what they have into the napkin or tissue, put it down, and continue with the meal.

By **setting the scene** with **basic** mealtime rules there becomes regularity and routine that reduces both the child's anxiety around mealtimes but also the parent or guardians' anxiety too. These **basic rules** build a mealtime structure that therapies can be added to later to allow for improved variety.

If you are struggling with setting up a regular routine for your child, or need further support, please contact us for a consult with our dietitian.

