



Healthy eating: a parent's guide

<https://parentzone.org.uk/article/healthy-eating-parents-guide>



Helping your child eat well and learn about healthy food is a crucial part of parenting, but sometimes it's tricky to figure out what (and how much) they should eat. Here is Lucy Jones, consultant dietitian, top tips on childhood nutrition and good family eating.

Parents get a lot of confusing information about nutrition, especially online. What are the most basic, essential things to know about helping a child eat well?

The National Eat Well Guide should form the base of healthy eating for all children over the age of 5 (working towards it gradually from age 2 for younger children).

Check out the diagram over the page:



It shows us that most of their food intake should be made up from vegetables, fruits, wholegrain carbohydrates and smaller portions of meat, fish and dairy. Most children still consume far too much sugar – around 15% of their energy is coming from sugar rather than the recommended 5%, so this is one area we really need to tackle. The best way to do this is to avoid sugary drinks and limit treats like sweets, desserts, chocolate, flavoured milkshakes, ice cream etc to once or twice a week.

Most of us still don't eat enough of the good stuff either, like fruits, vegetables and fibre, so finding ways to incorporate more of these is really important. Average intake of fruit and vegetables for children aged 11 to 18 years is only 3 portions per day for boys and 2.7 portions per day for girls, and only 10% of boys and 7% of girls in this age group meet the "5-a-day" recommendation. Aim to include fruits, veg or salad with every meal and if your kids don't like brown rice or pasta, try doing a 50/50 mix as a compromise. This will still really help to improve their fibre intake.

Our national diet survey also shows us that many children and young people don't get enough essential minerals in their diet such as iron, calcium and zinc so try to make sure that you offer regular servings of nutritious foods like fish, white meat, lean red meat (unprocessed), beans and pulses, nuts and seeds and green leafy veg.

It's important to remember that children have higher energy requirements for their size compared to adults, and often benefit from eating more little and often. 3 small meals and 1-2 snacks often works well and allows a good variety of foods to be offered at different times.

Are there any good sources of information about healthy eating online? Anything parents should definitely avoid?

The internet is awash with information about healthy eating, but some of it is based on opinions rather than evidence and written by people without adequate nutrition training. Knowing where to get trusted information is really important. Try some of these:

British Dietetic Association Food Factsheets: <https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/home>

British Nutrition Foundation: Healthy Living <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/healthyliving.html>

Try to avoid following trends or search terms like clean eating, gluten and dairy free (unless medically indicated due to allergy etc), low carb, high protein diets as these tend to be written by unregulated people online and may contain harmful nutritional advice for young people.

Have you got any advice on tackling picky eating in kids?

Fussy eating is really common in young children with one study finding that 50% of parents labelled their 19-24 month olds as 'picky'. Most children grow and thrive without significant impact on their health and development despite short periods of fussy eating.

For others, however, the behaviour becomes persistent. Sometimes it's made worse by parents getting stressed out at mealtimes and it can then affect eating later on in childhood. Since poor diets in childhood can often predict poor diets in adulthood, this is really important for us to tackle. Fussy eating is linked to a higher intake of saturated fats and fewer varieties of fruits and vegetables, which are both linked to obesity. Fussy eaters also have lower intakes of folate, fibre, vitamin E and vitamin C, probably due to reduced intake of fruits and vegetables. This can impact immunological and digestive health and influence cell damage.

In essence, the key to managing it is to **'ignore the behaviour, not the problem!'** This means try to avoid stress and fuss at mealtimes and start working behind the scenes, without making the child too aware of it using the following techniques.

Two useful family interventions are outlined below.

Repeated exposure

Keep offering the same foods time and time again as it can take 10, 20 and even 30 exposure to the same food before a child will start to accept it. Most parents stop offering it after only 5 attempts so persistence is key.

Simply seeing, touching, learning about and handling food also increases the chances of it being accepted at mealtimes so you could try a grow-your-own vegetable patch through to getting them involved in shopping, prepping and cooking.

Modelling

Eating as a family and using your children's friends to influence eating habits can be really helpful (if their friends aren't fussy eaters too). Children are much more likely to accept foods that they see others eating. Try to get together round a table whenever possible.

Lucy's 10 Golden Rules of Healthy, Happy Mealtimes are below and these will help you to get your children into healthy habits which will set them up for their whole lives.

1. **Same time, same place!** Establish a stable routine with known times and locations for meals and snacks. Familiar places and times can help the child feel relaxed and comfortable.
2. **You set the rules.** Offer simple, healthy food and don't ask them what they want. Offer a little, and then more if they finish it with lots of praise.
3. **If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.** Refusal of new foods is entirely normal. Remove uneaten food without comment. Continue to offer the same food alongside more accepted foods at future mealtimes. It could take 15-25 exposures before acceptance.
4. **No pressure!** Don't force or pressurise your child to eat; studies show this makes it worse.
5. **No choccy rewards!** Don't reward eating with liked foods – use a trip to the park / cinema / new magazine instead.
6. **Don't restrict access to liked foods.** It is only likely to reinforce their desirability.
7. **Be a role model.** Don't offer vegetables whilst you eat a takeaway. The best mealtimes are where the child has someone to copy such as parents, siblings and friends.
8. **Make mealtimes happy and fun.** Avoid telling off or bad atmospheres.
9. **Look what I did!** Involve your child: grow-your-own, pick-your-own, helping with food preparation. Handling foods helps towards acceptance, in the same way as repeated offerings at mealtimes.
10. **Don't stress about the mess!** Allow self-feeding from a very early age. Freedom increases their sense of control and helps them eat more.

Any tips on making healthy eating fun for families?

Absolutely. Make a weekly chart of evening meals by looking in recipe books and letting the kids pick out some of these. Then challenge them to get involved, be it with prepping, cooking or serving. Meals which are great fun include homemade pizzas where everyone picks their toppings and decorates them themselves, or mezze type pick and mix affairs with salad sticks, tapas small bowls, dips, and lots of different things for them to try.

Try not to get in the habit of offering the same meals over and over again with no variety – do keep your family favourites but aim to try new things each week as a family too.

In the summer eating in the garden can be great fun, either as a picnic or a BBQ.