

## Resistant Eaters

Fear of unfamiliar foods is a developmental stage that begins between 2 and 3 years of age. It generally diminishes around the age of 5.

Overcoming aversion to new foods requires a structured continuous and sensitive approach to exposing a child to new foods. Eating is not something that can be coerced and parents cannot make a child eat. They CAN provide the environment to increase tolerance of new foods. It can be a slow process that takes much patience.

For children with special needs there can be several contributing factors to resistance to new foods.

- Decreased oral-motor skills can make it more difficult for unfamiliar foods, with new challenges, to be moved around for chewing and drinking.
- Restricted patterns of behavior and repetitive routines can decrease acceptance of new foods.
- Decreased communication skills can also decrease acceptance of new foods and eating routines.

Continuous exposure to new foods in a variety of activities is needed to overcome resistance.

Some good activities for this include:

1. **Food preparation** is an excellent way to expose a resistant eater to new foods. Once it is prepared, the food should only be offered at a scheduled eating time, unless the child asks for a taste.
  - \*Involve the child in selecting new recipes by looking at recipe and story books.
  - \*Involve the child in part or all of the purchasing of ingredients for the recipes.
  - \*Involve the child in the preparation of new foods and the clean-up. This can involve getting ingredients and equipment, measuring ingredients, pouring, stirring, clean-up, etc. **Doing an activity from the planning process through the clean-up is great motor skills, sequencing skills and beginning to understand the concepts of beginning, middle and end. These tasks are the precursors to organizational skills, reading, and math.**
2. **Imaginative play** with pretend food
3. **Read books** with your child that include foods and meals.

4. **Feed your child around strong role-models** who enjoy eating a variety of foods
5. **Create a meal/snack visual schedule** to help the child better understand there is a consistent and predictable routine. This frequently gives a greater sense of security to the child.
6. **Provide only water between regularly scheduled snacks/meals.** The goal is to set clear limits for eating and limit grazing.
7. **Eating should be done at a table** and not wandering around or in front of a T.V. A quiet place with the support of good seating improves the comfort, attention and motor skills needed for eating.
8. **Set up a routine for transition to the table.** This might include hand washing, selecting utensils, put food on the table, pour drink, and placing napkins. A visual schedule often helps.
9. **The child should not be allowed to return to the table,** if they leave before the meal is completed. This is not meant to be harsh, but to establish clear limits. The adults must remain neutral, and let the child know they will not eat until the **next scheduled snack/meal.**
10. **Provide opportunities for structured flexibility and choice-making.** Give the child a choice between at least 2 different plates, utensils or cups. A sense of some control can go a long way toward helping a child feel more comfortable.
11. **Select only one menu for the entire family.** Do not get into the trap of being a short-order cook.
12. **Consider texture, color and smell when introducing a new food.** Exotic foods with strong odors may not be a good place to start when introducing new foods. Also, some foods are easier to chew and swallow. Tough, thick meat or corn on the cob will likely be too difficult to chew and swallow.
13. **Make sure you are offering age-appropriate portions** of foods, or even smaller. The goal is for the child to feel successful in eating new foods, no matter how small a portion. A good rule of thumb to consider is 1 tablespoon (or less) of each food for each year of the child's age. If the child desires more, that is a celebration that should be honored.
14. **Present new and preferred foods near to the child's plate** before ever offering the food to the child.
15. **Offer at least 1 preferred food at every meal/snack.** This is critical to success. First offer the new food and ask for a trial taste. If the child becomes anxious, ask for a 'no thank you bite or kiss of the food' before it is removed, and preferred food is offered.

16. **Do not cater to a child's rigidity in wanting only the same foods.** Make **small** changes to preferred foods (cut differently, colored with food coloring, mixed with another preferred food or sauce, try a different brand).
17. **Never discuss the child's eating habits** or how much they eat during the meal/snack.
18. **Do discuss** the taste, texture and smell of new foods.
19. **A child must clean-up** any thing they throw or destroy at the table.
20. **Calmly remove from the table a child who has a tantrum or is non-compliant.** Remain calm and let the child know that their behavior is sending the message that they are not hungry or are finished. The rest of the family should continue the meal without the child.

“Parents and professionals working with children are responsible for preparing and providing a balanced meal at an appropriate schedule and setting. The child is solely responsible for whether they eat and how much they eat.” *Ellyn Slater, How to Get Your Kids to Eat...But Not Too Much (1987)*