

MULTI AWARD-WINNING KIDS COACH

FROM FUSSY TO FOODY!

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HELPING KIDS LOVE FOOD FOR LIFE:

PRACTICAL ADVICE, REAL STORIES, AND

A DOLLOP OF LAUGHTER!

JO JOSEPH

From Fussy to Foody

Helping Kids Love Food for Life:
Practical Advice, Real Stories,
and a Dollop of Laughter

Jo Joseph

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Dedication

For my two kind, funny and beautiful boys. You have both shown me how to love food, find joy in eating and bring so much happiness and laughter to each of our meal and snack times together.

Thank you

Love always,

Mama

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Preface

Hello, Mama (Daddy, Nan, Grandpa, Aunt, Uncle, Carer), as the saying goes ‘it take a village to raise kids!’

Welcome to The Bite Club Co! Thank you for taking this step to help develop your child’s friendship with food. It’s quite the journey, you are not alone and, in the years, to come your kids will thank you for having a go! This book will guide you, with a few laughs along the way, as your child goes from little fussy eater to big confident foody.

Ah, fussy eating, the phase that sneaks up on us just when we think we’ve cracked the code! The weaning phase was likely full of fun messes, wide-eyed taste tests, and giggles as your little one explored new flavours and textures. But as kids grow, their tastes can suddenly change and they sometimes decide that familiar foods are “so last year.” They may turn up their nose at foods they used to love, leaving you thinking, *What happened?!*

We know two things for sure:

- 1) Kids usually go through fussy eating starting in the early years, at around 18 months old.
- 2) Kids think healthy food is boring, bitter and unpredictable (it’s science), to start, at least.

I’m here for reassurance and provide you with an armour of practical and easy-to-follow tools to help you transform meal and snack times into enjoyable moments, with less stress and more smiles!

Growing up I used to snack in secret. I still remember now, when I was probably four or five years old, hiding in our pantry, aka under the stair's cupboard, trying to quietly eat a packet of cheese and onion crisps. This followed with years of yo-yo dieting, weight fluctuations and body consciousness.

It wasn't until I became a parent myself and trained as a Child Nutrition Coach, I started to learn about the impact our childhood food habits can have on our grown-up selves. When I was young, snacks were restricted, with the belief that it would 'ruin' mealtimes and phrases like 'snacks are bad' or 'no snacks today' or 'you eat too many snacks' were commonplace.

All said from a place of good, a way to make me eat the three set meals and concern for my health, however I constantly felt hungry in-between meals. For children, snacks are an essential part of the day and should be built into daily routine. This book will help unpick some of the things you may have heard, remember growing up with or even used yourself and provide support with science-led, practical steps to move forward.

We all know that fussy eating is common, but did you know that children's taste preferences are influenced by their biology? Little ones are born with a natural preference for sweet flavours to encourage them to drink their milk during infancy, which is sweet, (thank you, evolutionary survival). Therefore, this preference can make nutritious veggies feel like a hard sell and requires

more time and effort. Understanding these natural inclinations and using appropriate techniques to overcome them can help us build strong food foundations and make meal and snack times less stressful.

Remember, “Learning to eat is like learning any other skill. It takes time, patience, and lots of practice!”

You can also start your journey to a fuss-free table with our free guide, Fussy to Foody: Bite Starter Kit. A gentle introduction to the unique BITE method, which helps you set boundaries, make eating inviting, help build trust and encourages exploring food together. With this book, you can be rest assured, you’re setting the foundation, making food fun whilst providing a balanced, varied diet!

Fill out the quick form at The Bite Club Co. or email us at hello@thebiteclubco.com to grab your FREE copy!"

Now, let’s embrace this adventure together, grab a snack (just for you, no sharing!), and let’s dive in with humour, creativity, a heaping spoonful of patience, and encouragement to each meal and snack time.

With love, laughter & encouragement,
Jo at The Bite Club Co. Multi award-winning Child Nutrition Coach

What Actually is Fussy Eating?

1. What is Fussy Eating?

Fussy eating usually peaks around 18 months, just as your child's sense of independence kicks in. Now, eating is not only about nourishment; it is also an opportunity to express preferences, assert control, and even throw in some drama!

1.1. Common Signs of Fussy Eating

Eating is a skill; it takes time but, in the meantime, you may start to see these common signs of Fussy Eating:

Refusal of New Foods

Just looking at something new could result in a 'no' let alone having a taste. The sight of anything green and unfamiliar might even inspire gagging

Unpredictable Reactions to Familiar Foods

Foods they adored last week are now "suspicious." Suddenly, the once-accepted carrots and peas are "no-go" zones. Yesterday's veggie hero suddenly become today's evil villain.

Preference for Beige

If they could, some kids would build a diet around crackers, bread, and plain pasta. These neutral-coloured foods feel "safe" and predictable, i.e. they are usually the same taste, texture each time.

A parent once shared that their child looked at a perfectly arranged vegetable plate and said, "That's for rabbits, not me." The child had remembered their recent trip to a farm

park and some of the foods that the animals were eating. They had associated the brightly coloured array of veggies as ‘rabbit food’. Oh, how a child’s mind works, the humour in these moments is a reminder that each stage has its quirks. As adults, this perfectly logical reasoning for kids, may feel completely far-fetched, but the trick is to go with it and use strategies to help them to want to eat the ‘rabbit food’.

1.2. Food Friendship (aka Relationship)

Building a positive relationship with food is more than just managing fussy eating, it’s about the connections, habits, and emotions kids develop with food over time. Children’s friendship with food often mirror the way we, as adults relate to it. This is where we can play a crucial role in setting a positive example, more in chapter three.

What Shapes a Child’s Food Friendship?

Food friendships involve the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours associated with eating. For example, do we only reward good behaviour with treats, or do we label some foods as “good” and others as “bad”? While some of these habits seem harmless, they can influence how children approach food as they grow.

You may start to spot *unhealthy* food relationships first, and which might show up as:

- **Emotional Eating:** Turning to food for comfort when they're upset.
- **Food Rules:** Developing strict ideas about “safe” and “unsafe” foods.
- **Ignoring Hunger Cues:** Eating based on external cues, like rewards, rather than hunger.

For me it was emotionally eating snacks. My childhood experiences of snacking in secret made me feel safe and happy as a child, therefore as an adult whenever I wasn't feeling good or had a stressful day, I would turn to eating. This time not quite hidden away in the pantry, but still not honest with myself about what and how much I was actually eating.

It was a comfort blanket that I had clung onto for over 30 years to make me feel better. It is eye-opening to see how quickly children can build associations between emotions and food and importantly carry into adulthood, especially having lived through it.

Activity 1: Reflecting on Food Memories

Think back to your own childhood food memories. Was there a food you were always encouraged to eat? How did you feel sitting at the dinner table or during meal and snack times? How did those experiences shape the way you feel about it today? Reflect on how you might bring those memories into a positive space for your child's eating journey.

1.3. Fussy Behaviours

Around 18 months, it's normal to see more fussy eating behaviours as kids begin to exercise their independence and boundaries. These behaviours can be puzzling, but they're also part of a child's natural development and need for exploration.

During this time, kids may start rejecting foods based on sight, texture, or even colour. Recognising these behaviours and learning how to address them in a calm way can make meal and snack times much more manageable.

Common Fussy Eating Behaviours

- **Food Rejection on Sight**

The colour, texture, or even the shape of a food can result in an instant “no.” If it looks too green, mixed, or unfamiliar, it's a no-go.

- **Playing with Food**

Rather than eating, they're more interested in making towers out of peas or painting with yogurt on their plate. They're still learning about food, and playing does help, but be mindful of when and how long this takes place, more on this later.

- **Food Separation**

If foods are mixed together, some kids will meticulously separate each item on their plate before eating them or refuse to eat it entirely.

- **Throwing Food**

Sometimes a form of protest, other times simply “scientific” experimentation of gravity. When kids throw food, it may mean they’re not hungry, or they’re overwhelmed by what’s on their plate, or they simply didn’t enjoy it this time.

- **Sensory Overload**

The texture, smell, or even temperature of food can cause an instinctive “no.” Kids use all their senses to eat (taste, touch, smell, sight and sound), and certain foods may feel “unsafe” to them.

- **Preference for Plain Foods**

Plain pasta, rice, bread, or potatoes are often the preferred foods because they feel predictable and safe.

- **Upset or Crying**

This could be at any point when eating, it may take you by complete surprise and feel like for no apparent reason.

- **Retching, spitting or vomiting**

As quickly as the food goes into the mouth, it comes back out again. A way to remove food that, maybe they didn’t want to eat in the first place but gave it a go, or tried it and didn’t like it, as opposed to choking or an illness.

A friend told me that their child refused “spaghetti in sauce” but eagerly ate the same noodles without the sauce. The gooey texture of the red tomato sauce was something that they just weren’t ready for. So gradually

sauce was added to build up to the full meal. Sometimes it's about a tiny change in presentation to help kids along as they learn.

Activity 2: The Sensory Play Plate

On a day when you are happy for some messy play, pop a floor cover under the chair if needed, offer a “sensory plate” with foods of different textures (crunchy, soft, juicy). Let little ones touch, squish, and smell the food.

Talk about the different properties of the food and ask them to describe each one. It's a safe, low-pressure way for children to explore foods, creating familiarity and building comfort over time all without the pressure to eat.

Why is my Child Fussy?

2. Reasons for Fussy Eating

Wondering why your little one has suddenly become picky? Fussy eating has multiple causes or triggers, which can range from developmental stages to sensory processing and natural growth cycles. Understanding these can help us take a gentler approach, making meal and snack time an opportunity to want to eat.

2.1. Big Kid, Adult-Led Reasons

The environment we as adults create around food can greatly impact a child's willingness to eat. Here are some common adult-led reasons that can potentially influence fussiness:

Meal and Snack Timings

Grazing throughout the day can leave children feeling full at meal and snack times, reducing their interest in trying new foods or simply not wanting to eat. It's tempting to offer food whenever requested (because a child who says they're '*starving*' is quite convincing!), but frequent grazing can lead to unpredictable eating patterns. It's okay to set boundaries, say 'no' followed by when the next meal or snack time is coming i.e. not now we are eating in 30 minutes.

Structured meal and snack times allow children to recognise hunger and fullness cues more effectively, helping them feel settled and secure about when food is available. Having five or six opportunities to eat during

the day reassures children that food will be available, reducing any stress around meal and snack times.

Pressure and Control

Even the gentlest forms of pressure, like “just one more bite,” can make children feel obligated, which often triggers resistance. Encouragement can work wonders, but too much insistence can turn the table into a battleground, and before you know it, the broccoli on their plate becomes the *enemy*. Kids may also develop a habit of eating to please, even if they’re already full, rather than trusting their internal hunger cues and leading to unhealthy habits down the road.

Pressure may be felt and heard by children in many different forms from the occasionally coaxing of ‘spinach makes you big & strong’ to the odd bribe ‘if you have one more piece we can go to the park’ to age related rules ‘you are four years old, so you’ll need to eat four carrots.’

Phrases you may have heard or even used yourself and usually stemming from a place of good, however, they have a tendency of having the opposite effect. Being mindful that what we as adults say around the table has an impact and could leave a lasting impression, is key. The mealtime “just try a taste” game is often a delicate dance, and sometimes less really is more.

Parenting Food Style and Expectations

Parenting food style plays a role in how children approach food. Encouraging a relaxed, flexible approach

helps children see eating as a positive, low-pressure activity. Rather than negotiating every bite like a high-stakes trade deal, try focusing on creating a stress-free mealtime. The ‘diplomatic’ approach balances structure with flexibility, giving kids the freedom to listen to their hunger cues, while a strict or highly structured approach may ignore children’s appetite levels and create a sense of tension. Research shows that there are four general parenting food styles:

- **Indulgent**

Saying yes to whatever the child requests, from skipping veggies to endless grazing.

- **Controlling**

Making food decisions for the child, including how much should be eaten and insisting on finished plates.

- **Uninvolved**

Leaving food choices entirely up to the child with minimal guidance or structure.

- **Diplomatic**

Offering choices within limits, encouraging new foods while respecting hunger and fullness cues.

The diplomatic approach is often found to create the most positive environment. This is also known as the ‘Division of Responsibility’, a feeding technique developed following research by leading Registered Dietician, Ellyn Satter.

The research shows that where both the parent/carer and child have clear feeding roles, this will help children to create balanced foundations and a healthy relationship with food. More on this in chapter three.

A parent once told me that his “indulgent” parenting approach meant his child’s meals mostly consisted of plain noodles with the occasional cheese sprinkle. He let his child choose their meals because growing up he wasn’t allowed to choose. He didn’t have fond mealtime memories, and he didn’t want his child to feel the same.

However, this meant his child didn’t explore a varied, balanced diet and now he was concerned about his health. After introducing the “diplomatic” style (and one special “big kid veggie plate”), noodles slowly became one option among many at the table, whilst still having fun filled meal and snack times.

I myself grew up in a ‘controlling’ household approach to eating. Everything from when to eat, how much to eat, whether pudding would be offered or not i.e. only after everything on the plate was cleared, was controlled. Although coming from a place of good, it made eating together uninviting and not enjoyable.

As I got older and was able to shop on my own, I rebelled against this control and ate whatever and whenever I pleased. Everything from fresh cream cakes from the bakery on the way to school, to pick and mix sweets on the way home. This really did not have a lot to do with my

appetite or hunger cues but was mainly a way to feel in control, even if it wasn't healthy or right for my body.

Activity 3: Positive Food Talk

Instead of the usual pressure phrases like “just one bite” or “finish your veggies,” use positive, curiosity-building phrases that make eating fun. Make a simple card with a 3x3 grid as a reminder to use during each meal or snack time. Each square should include a positive food phrase that invites curiosity or describes food in a fun way. For example: Let us know when you are done, you don't have to finish it if you are full, The pasta is squishy! Can you think of other squishy foods? Help yourself to anything you like on the table.

“Getting the kids to try new food is like asking them to do a bushtucker trial on I’m a Celebrity, get me out of here!”

2.2. Little Kid, Child-Led Reasons

Children's preferences can feel like they're changing by the minute, and their unique approaches to eating often reflect their growing independence. Here are some

common child-led factors influencing their fussiness and relationship with food:

Growth and Appetite Changes

As children's growth slows after the first year, their appetite and frequency of eating often decrease, leading to parents' well-practiced sighs of, "Just one more bite?" But don't be alarmed if they seem to be "living on air" one day and devouring everything in sight the next day, children have a way of keeping us on our toes (our fridge on standby) as their appetite can change daily.

Anxiety

If meal and snack times feels too intense, kids may decide that eating broccoli is as scary as meeting a dragon! Any sense of pressure can make kids anxious, and they may develop a little "fear factor" around the table. A calm environment can turn broccoli from foe to friend (or at least, into something they might hold).

Tiredness

For a tired child, sitting at the table might as well be climbing a mountain. When fatigue sets in, hunger cues are easily forgotten, and you might get the classic "head resting in the spaghetti plate" look. Sleep and rest wins over dinner sometimes, and that's okay! Let kids have a snooze and come back to food a little later.

Too Much Food and Drink

Little stomachs fill up quickly, and children are often more interested in quantity rather than quality. So, if your

child has just guzzled down a whole juice box, don't be surprised if dinnertime is treated like an optional activity. Give them some extra time to build up their appetite and try again at the next food opportunity.

Distractions

Young children's attention span is still developing: so why eat peas when there's a dinosaur to play with? Screens, toys, and all the things that help kids sit still don't always help them *eat*. And while the TV might keep them seated, they may only be there to watch "dino rescue" (other programmes available also) rather than actually eat their food. Distractions also restrict children from listening to their hunger and fullness cues.

Food Neophobia

The "fear of new foods" is common and a child's way of being cautious. Familiar foods feel safe and predictable, whilst new foods are often eyed like alien visitors. But with patience, familiarity, and repetition they will slowly start to add them to their 'safe' list.

Taste Preferences

Sweet flavours are beloved by young taste buds, while anything bitter or green tends to raise suspicions. This is evolutionary and designed as way to encourage babies to drink their milk which has a sweet taste. The first taste of spinach often inspires a face that suggests you've just given them a lemon mixed with kale (the horror!). It doesn't mean that they don't like it, it is just different, and veggies may take time. Their love for sweets is nearly

instant but taste buds develop as they grow, and they will soon enjoy the variety.

Personality and Control

As they explore their own preferences, many children take a hard stance on “food freedom.” The classic “NO!” around the dinner table may have little to do with the food and more to do with exercising a sense of authority.

Learning to Self-Feed

Eating is a learned skill, and children may spend more time redecorating the table with their food than actually eating it. When you see that pile of peas lined up meticulously along the highchair, just remember, they are making a mess all whilst learning to eat.

Natural Fluctuations in Appetite

Children have a unique approach to hunger: some days they’re ravenous, other days they might be satisfied with a single slice of bread. Daily fluctuations in children’s appetite is normal, with lots of factors impacting their hunger. Take it week by week rather than day by day.

Activity 4: Try a “Taste & Texture Scorecard”

Create a taste and texture scorecard where kids can record their reactions to different foods. For each food, let them mark the different aspects of taste, smell etc to describe whether it’s crunchy, soft, sweet, or sour, and whether they “loved it,” “liked it,” or “maybe next time.” This helps them think about the food experience in a fun

way, with no pressure to eat. As their preferences change, they can change scores, helping you both track their current tastes and discover new ones over time.

2.3. Medical Factors

Common Medical Factors Impacting Appetite

While fussy eating is often a normal part of childhood development, there are times when medical factors can play a role in a child's eating habits. Medical issues can impact appetite, digestion, and even a child's willingness to try new foods. Understanding these factors can help parents and carers feel reassured and know when it might be time to consult a healthcare professional for further support. These include:

Constipation

When children experience constipation, it can lead to discomfort, a full feeling, and less interest in eating. Regular bowel movements are important for appetite, so if a child is frequently constipated, addressing this can help improve their willingness to eat.

Anaemia

Low iron levels can lead to fatigue and decreased appetite. Iron-rich foods, like red meats, beans, and spinach, can help, if a child is anaemic.

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

For some children, the texture, taste, or smell of certain foods can be overwhelming. SPD can lead to strong

aversions to foods with specific textures, like mushy or crunchy items.

Oral-Motor Difficulties

Some children have difficulty chewing or swallowing certain textures. This may cause them to avoid specific foods, as they are much harder for them to eat.

Allergies or Intolerances

Undiagnosed food allergies or intolerances can cause discomfort, bloating, or other digestive issues that make children hesitant to eat. If certain foods consistently cause distress, it's worth consulting a doctor to rule out an allergy or intolerance.

Acid Reflux

Acid reflux can cause discomfort, especially during or after eating. Children with reflux may avoid eating to prevent the sensation of heartburn. Medications or dietary adjustments may help in managing symptoms.

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)

ARFID is a severe eating disorder where children may avoid food due to sensory sensitivities, fear of choking, or other psychological factors.

When to Seek Help

If you notice any of these medical factors and/or start to see the following, it's worth reaching out to a healthcare professional:

- Persistent weight loss or lack of growth
- Severe reactions to food textures or tastes
- Physical discomfort during or after meals
- Constantly avoiding whole food groups
- Anxiety around meal and snack times

I once knew a little boy who avoided all crunchy foods. His parents assumed it was a phase, but after consulting their GP and an occupational therapist, they discovered he had mild oral-motor difficulties. With a few fun exercises to help with chewing and swallowing, they were able to support him, and he was soon enjoying a wider variety of foods!

Note: This book covers information for children with ‘general or typical’ fussy eating habits. It does not address medical factors, feeding disorders/aversions, allergies (such as Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, ARFID), or children with SEND.

If your child’s fussy eating persists or if you have ongoing concerns, it’s best to consult your GP, Health Visitor, or SEND team for specialised support and guidance.

Activity 5: Food Diary

If you suspect a medical factor, try keeping a food diary. Write down what your child eats, any reactions (like discomfort or fatigue), and any behaviours like food

refusal or meal avoidance. You may notice patterns, like foods they'll always try, foods they avoid, or reactions that change.

Tracking these experiences helps identify their likes, dislikes, and anything that might change with repeated exposure. This can also help healthcare professionals get a clearer picture of what may be the cause and guide you to the right support.

How to Help my Child Love Food

3. Becoming a Big, Confident Foody

Helping your child go from “Fussy” to “Foody” involves patience, consistency, and plenty of creative strategies. Here are some key areas to focus on as you introduce new foods and work toward a healthy food relationship:

3.1. Balanced Nutrition

Helping little ones become open to different foods starts with a balanced approach to nutrition that respects their tastes and natural curiosity. Rather than aiming for perfection, try focusing on creating a well-rounded diet that offers a variety of nutrients, colours, and flavours.

Whilst children need a variety of nutrients for growth, energy, and mental development, that doesn't mean we need to introduce everything at once. By slowly adding foods from each food group over time, you're helping build their palate and setting a foundation for a well-balanced diet. The essentials include, carbohydrates, fruit and veg, protein, fats and vitamins and minerals. Think of nutrition as a puzzle, with each food group providing an important “piece.” There is more on nutrition and hydration later in chapter four.

Practical Ways to Add Variety

To introduce a variety of nutrients and make eating inviting, start by offering foods your child already likes and pair them with new items. Here are some tips:

- **Divide the Plate**

One-third of the plate is familiar (think pasta or chicken), one-third is a “sometimes” food (maybe a favourite treat), and one-third is a new food. They’re more likely to try the new item when it sits alongside their favourites, or at least be curious about it.

- **Introduce New Foods Gradually**

Start with very small portions of a new food on the plate alongside familiar items. Encourage children to try a “no-thank-you” bite, but don’t insist on finishing anything they’re hesitant about.

- **Choose a “Star Food” Each Week**

Pick one food (like broccoli or bananas) and find fun ways to incorporate it all week, from roasting to blending into smoothies to taking out as snacks to cutting up into animal faces.

- **Start Simple and Build Up**

For younger kids, a simple structure with a protein, carb, veggie and dairy fats is often easiest to manage. As they grow, try gradually adding more components and textures to each meal.

Practice Patience

Children often need repeated exposure before accepting new foods. Did you know that children may need 10-15 exposures to a new food before they feel comfortable trying it? After endlessly trying a particular food item, reserving it for next day leftovers, it is more than likely

that one day, like a bolt of lightning, out of the blue they either ask for that said food or happily eat it when served, as if the last 14 attempts didn't happen. So, keep trying, and if something doesn't work today, try again, and again, and again in a few days.

Empower Through Choice

When kids get to choose between two options (“Would you like apple slices or cucumber sticks?”), they're more likely to feel invested in the decision. Just be sure to limit the options so they don't feel overwhelmed and avoid pairing a favourite with something new. Offering 2 or 3 choices allows kids to feel like they're part of the mealtime decision-making process and means you are exploring food together across the whole eating process.

Once you've cooked or plated their choice, try to stick with it. Kids are quick to catch on if they think “Plan B or C” is a possibility! If they decide not to eat, accept it with grace and offer the next opportunity for food at their next snack or mealtime. This approach teaches them that every meal or snack time isn't a negotiation, and that food choices are limited to what's made available.

Serve Family Style

Family-style meals give children a sense of freedom and control. Instead of everyone getting a pre-plated meal, place dishes in the middle of the table and let everyone serve themselves. I would also recommend popping down the dessert at the same time and if they decide to

pop the carrots on top of the ice cream, that's absolutely fine, just go with it.

Even if they only take a small portion, this approach reinforces independence and helps them feel like active participants. They may start small, but over time, they'll become more confident in picking from each food group.

*“As adults our food habits
sub-consciously replicates
our own parents &
experiences”*

Avoid Labels & Restrictions

Kids have a radar for anything labelled as “off-limits.” Call something a “treat” or put strict rules around it, and it instantly becomes the forbidden treasure! Rather than labelling foods as “good” or “bad” or categorising treats as “special,” try talking about food in a neutral way. Discuss flavours, colours, and how foods make us feel, rather than focusing on whether they're a “reward” or something only eaten on special occasions.

Create Mess

If you've ever seen a child learning to eat spaghetti, you know they learn best when they're elbow-deep in sauce! Young children explore the world through all five senses, and food is no exception. Get ready to embrace the mess, pop a floor covering under their chair if you prefer

and let them squish, sniff, poke, and even toss a few things around.

Sensory food play is great and during ‘play’ check in to see if the eating part has now finished. The more use of all of the sensory experiences, the more likely they are to feel confident and curious around food.

Activity 6: Supermarket Surprise

Take your child to the store and let them pick out one new item. When you get home, research the food together and find a fun recipe that incorporates it. Making them a “co-chef” for the day makes them excited to try something different that they’ve created.

3.2. Creating an Inviting Environment

Eating isn’t just about the food, it’s about the atmosphere, too. Creating a pleasant, low-stress environment can make all the difference in helping children feel safe and engaged at meal and snack times. Think of it as setting the “mood” for positive eating experiences, where kids can enjoy their food and feel comfortable exploring new flavours and textures.

Routine, Routine, Routine!

Young children are creatures of habit and feel secure when there’s a predictable eating routine. Try to establish regular meal and snack times so their bodies

can develop a rhythm. This helps kids recognise hunger cues and understand that eating is essential.

- **Set a Meal Schedule**

Aim for three main meals and two or three snack times each day. This gives up to six opportunities to eat and the spacing ensures they're not overly hungry or stuffed, helping their bodies manage hunger naturally and limit the 'I'm starving' food requests.

Start with breakfast from the time they wake up, then alternate between snacks and meals every two to three hours throughout the day.

- **Create a Consistent Mealtime Routine**

Make meal and snack times consistent moments of the day. Aim for a similar setup every time, a set table, family gathered, and perhaps a fun ritual to begin, like lighting a candle, setting the table or choosing a "dinner song."

- **Keep it Short**

When it comes to time, keeping it short and sweet is often the best approach. Most kids can focus on a meal or snack time for about 20-30 minutes before getting bored or distracted. By keeping eating within this timeframe, you can help prevent wandering interest, and the inevitable "food fiddling" that follows. Once they're finished, allow them to do an activity or leave the table so that eating doesn't become drawn-out. As they get older this can be increased and table etiquette

introduced, but for now there is no need to drag out meal and snack times.

Creating Foody Feelings

Meal and snack times are a great opportunity to come together, create feel good memories and foster a love for food. Use these moments to enjoy food together, laugh about silly mishaps, and connect with one another over the day's activities.

- **Keep Mealtime Relaxed**

Encourage everyone to eat at their own pace, with little focus on the food and more on the eating environment. If dinner turns into a dance break or a giggle session, enjoy the moment! It's all part of the experience.

- **Eating Together**

With busy schedules, it can be tough to eat together as a family, but even a few shared meals each week can make a big difference. Eating together shows kids that it is a time to connect, chat, and enjoy food as a family. It's an opportunity to role model healthy eating habits and foster a positive relationship with food

- **Table Conversations**

Keep chat positive by encouraging light-hearted conversation about their day, favourite animals, or silly questions like "If you were a vegetable, which would you be?" These conversations help distract from any anxiety about eating or trying new foods and keeps everyone relaxed whilst adding a dash of fun to the table.

- Limit Distractions

Avoid using toys, screens, or tablets during meals. Instead, create a focused mealtime where everyone can pay attention to their food, one another and listen to their hunger and fullness cues. Once the eating is finished they can then enjoy their favourite activities.

*“Kid’s appetite, tastes
and mood vary daily,
so take it week
by week”*

Division of Responsibility

The ‘Division of Responsibility’ approach sets clear parent/carer and child roles. Instead of making children feel they “must” eat, letting them decide *‘if and how much’* to eat fosters a sense of independence, and often leads to a happier (and fuller) child.

Your role is then very much about the practicalities of eating and deciding *‘where’* meal and snack times take place, *‘when’* they occur and *‘what’* will be served, often limiting to one to two options.

Think of mealtime like a dance, not a wrestling match. The more you let them play a part in eating, the more they’re likely to step in and try a bite!

There is further support and tools on the Division of Responsibility in the Parenting Food Styles Guide as part of the From Fussy to Foody series. Check it out on Amazon or on our website.

Shop, Prep, Cook

Involving kids in the food process, from choosing ingredients at the store to washing veggies, can work wonders for getting them to explore and eventually try new foods. Giving them “mini chef” duties, like putting food in the trolley or helping rinse produce, helps them feel proud of what’s on the table. Letting kids help with table setting, serving themselves, or even clearing their plates can foster responsibility and a positive attitude toward eating.

The pride they feel in contributing will often reflect in their willingness to try what’s on their plate. The thrill of eating their “own” creations makes the meal taste better (and, who knows, they may even eat a few extra bites in the process!). Research shows that children who help prepare food are more likely to eat it.

A mum I worked with once shared that her daughter only wanted “small people food,” so she would use cookie cutters to make tiny sandwich shapes or arrange veggie sticks into fun designs. Her relaxed approach turned mealtimes into a fun experience and eventually helped her child accept larger, more “grown-up” portions.

Activity 7: “My Mealtime Planner”

Try a weekly meal planner activity with your child, where they can help choose meals for each day. Offer two or three options for each meal, letting them make choices and feel involved. Not only will this introduce a bit of “food freedom,” but it also helps them feel invested in what’s on their plate, bonus points if they then also try a new food from the planner!

3.3. Healthy Habits

Creating healthy eating habits is about more than food alone, it is about the attitudes, and joy that surround eating. Children thrive on consistency, and developing daily habits can help transform meal and snack times into a positive experience for years to come.

Developing a child’s healthy habits around food is more than just a short-term goal, it is a gift that will serve them for life. Building these habits takes time and patience, but the rewards are worth it. Healthy habits encourage kids to listen to their hunger cues, try new foods, and enjoy eating without feeling pressured.

Food Exploration

Children are curious by nature. They may not necessarily be ready to eat something new just yet, but they are generally intrigued to learn more about new things. You

can help foster this food curiosity in many different and wonderful ways to support their growth. When kids feel involved in the learning process and decision making about what to eat, they feel a sense of control, which can help reduce food-related power struggles.

- **Praise Exploration, Not Eating**

Rather than focusing on how much or little they eat, praise any curiosity they show about food. I would also suggest saving this praise for after the meal or snack time to discuss at other points during the day. Say, “I love that you tried a new flavour today,” or, “Thanks for putting that carrot on your plate, great job exploring!” Let your child know it’s okay not to eat everything on their plate. Give them the freedom to choose *if and how much* they eat, reducing meal and snack time stress and keeps it fun.

- **Food Games**

Playing games with food or pretend food and pictures is an ideal way to get kids excited about trying new things. This “learning through play” approach is a favourite in preschools and nurseries for a reason. When food becomes part of a game, kids often forget it’s something they might otherwise avoid. Whether it’s a “taste test challenge” or creating funny faces with veggies, or playing food shop, food games make the experience feel like a fun adventure. Try these in-between meal and snack times to show that there is no pressure to eat, and these are simply opportunities to play and learn.

- Scorecards

Using scorecards can give children a chance to reflect on their meal and snack times, where they “rate” their food based on different qualities. Encouraging them to score foods on texture, colour, or even how “crunchy” it is, can help create a better understanding of new foods. Instead of focusing on finishing food, the scorecard shifts the attention to exploring it. Kids love to be the “judge” (and you might just be surprised by what they decide to try for the sake of a high score).

I started this with my son when he was a toddler, and I still remember when he gave broccoli a solid “5 out of 5 for being green” and “0 for being squishy.” While broccoli wasn’t an immediate favourite, eventually, “scoring” it each time became such a game that he started eating it just to test out the squishiness.

*“The two best things you
can give children are:
Good Habits &
Great Memories!”*

Mindful Eating

Children are surprisingly very good at listening to their hunger and fullness cues from a young age. It may feel daunting or some days it doesn’t appear they have eaten enough but if they are given plenty of opportunities to eat

throughout the day, trust them to decide if and how much to eat. Here are some habits to nurture early:

- **Let Appetite Lead**

When it comes to eating, pressure is usually a recipe for resistance. Bribes, coaxing, and especially rules or punishments can make kids feel stressed or resentful at meal and snack times. While it can be tempting to urge “just one more bite,” letting kids follow their hunger cues helps them build a positive relationship with food.

Allow your child to tell you when they’re hungry. Try not to insist on “cleaning the plate” and instead serve smaller portions and offer second helpings if they’re interested. This helps them learn to trust their body’s hunger signals.

There is further support and tools on the better phrases to use in the Food Phase Guide as part of the From Fussy to Foody series. Check it out on Amazon or on our website.

- **Practice Appetite Awareness**

Let your child tell you when they’re done. Pushing “just one more bite” can disrupt their natural sense of fullness, leading to habits where they eat for others rather than for themselves. Respecting their limits, even if they change daily, teaches them to trust their body.

- **Introduce Mindfulness**

Help kids notice different flavours and textures by asking questions like, “Is that crunchy or soft?” or “Does it taste sweet or sour?” These questions encourage them to share their thoughts about the food without feeling pressured to eat.

A friend's little boy used to say, “My tummy is small like a mouse right now,” whenever he didn't want to finish his plate. This was even when we went out for meals together and I thought it was incredibly powerful. It was his way of describing his fullness creatively and a gentle reminder to his mum to respect his limits.

Learning

Children are like a sponge and love to learn about the world around them, food is a perfect subject for their curiosity. Showing them where food comes from, exploring the variety of colours and shapes in the fruit & veg aisle, or even doing a mini “farm-to-table” lesson are all great ways to make food feel more interesting.

Cooking together or learning what happens to food in the body are also wonderful opportunities to build a sense of discovery without the pressure to eat every bite. For example, children are often fascinated to learn that vegetables grow in the ground, apples grow on trees or that tomatoes start as tiny seeds.

Write it Down

Journaling about foods can turn your child into a little food explorer, tracking their likes, dislikes, and even their “maybe next time” foods. This approach not only helps you keep track of what’s working, but it also empowers kids to share their thoughts about each food item without feeling pressured to like everything.

They might even surprise you by deciding to “re-test” a food they didn’t like before! Each time they try a new food, have them note down what they thought about the taste, texture, or even how it smelled. Over time, this creates a record of their food journey, and they can look back to see all the foods they’ve tried (and maybe even give some a second chance).

Activity 8: “Little Chef Challenge”

Invite your child to “help” make a simple meal with you, like assembling a fruit salad or baking a cake. Give them choices about what to add, let them stir, and taste along the way. When children are involved, they’re more willing to try the final product.

Nutrition and Hydration

4. Nutrients, Portion Sizes, and Hydration

A balanced diet is essential for children's development, providing them with the energy, vitamins, and minerals they need to thrive. However, knowing exactly what, how much, and how often to serve can sometimes feel overwhelming. This section breaks down the essentials, focusing on portion sizes, nutrients, and hydration to make things easier.

4.1. Essential Nutrients

Carbohydrates/Starch

Carbohydrates are the primary source of energy for active, growing children. Whole grains (brown rice, whole wheat bread, oatmeal) are best as they provide more fibre and nutrients than refined grains.

Aim for 5 portions a day

Fruits and Vegetables

These also provide carbohydrates along with essential vitamins and fibre. Try to add a range of colours, like a rainbow on their plate! They don't have to eat it all, just keep it in sight.

Aim for 5 portions a day

Fats

Healthy fats are vital for brain development and hormone regulation. Sources of healthy fats include:

Unsaturated fats: Avocado, olive oil, nuts, and seeds

Dairy fats: Whole milk, yogurt, and cheese, which also provide calcium for bone health

Aim for 3 portions a day

Protein

Protein supports muscle growth, tissue repair, and a healthy immune system. It can be found in a variety of sources, such as:

Animal sources: Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products

Plant sources: Beans, lentils, tofu, and quinoa

Aim for 2 portions a day

Vitamins and Minerals

Growing bodies need vitamins and minerals like calcium, vitamin D, and iron. Here's a quick guide to some essentials:

Calcium (for bone health): Found in dairy, leafy greens, and fortified plant milks.

Iron (for red blood cells and energy): Present in meats, beans, lentils, and fortified cereals.

Vitamin D (supports bone health and immune function): Found in fish, fortified dairy products, and, of course, sunshine.

4.2. Portion Sizes by Age

Portion sizes should be adjusted to match a child's age and activity level. Here's a simple guide:

Toddlers (1-3 years)

Serve small portions, roughly a third to half of adult portions. Example: 1/4 to 1/2 cup of vegetables, 1/4 cup grains, 2-3 tablespoons of protein.

Preschoolers (3-5 years)

Slightly larger portions, about half to two-thirds of adult servings. Example: 1/2 cup of vegetables, 1/2 cup grains, 1/4 cup protein.

School-age (5-8 years)

Approximately two-thirds to full adult portions as they grow. Example: 1/2 to 3/4 cup of vegetables, 1/2 cup grains, 1/3 to 1/2 cup protein.

Perfect portions for little ones can vary each day, based on several factors including the amount of physical activity, however by aiming to offer food across the range of food groups it can help with a balanced, nutritious diet.

The free 5-5-3-2 Perfect Portions Guide, is a great tool providing lots of examples and ideas that the kids are sure to enjoy and is recommended by the British Nutrition Foundation. Drop us a quick email at hello@thebiteclubco.com today to grab your free copy.

4.3. How Much Water Do Kids Need?

Adequate hydration is crucial for children's overall health, impacting everything from energy levels to digestion. Here's how much water kids generally need in a serving of approximately 150-200ml:

Toddler (1-3 years)

Aim for about 6 cups of total fluids per day, which can include water, milk, and other non-sugary fluids.

Preschoolers (3-5 years)

Approximately 7 cups per day.

School-age (5-8 years)

About 7-8 cups daily.

Tips for Getting Kids to Drink Water

- **Set a Routine**

Make a water bottle available throughout the day and offer it consistently at regular times, like with meals, snacks and after playtime. They will then start to get in to a well established drinking habit.

- **Make It Fun**

Use a special cup or several cups or let them add a slice of lemon, cucumber, or berries to their water for flavour.

- **Model Hydration**

When kids see parents drinking water regularly, they're more likely to do the same.

I have around 7-10 different cups and bottles for my son, most of which are used throughout the day. I find having a bottle constantly available and then others rotated for each meal and snack time makes the water taste just that little bit nicer.

17 Pocket Prompts

5. Back Pocket Prompts

Wow, you've made it this far! How are you feeling as you near the end of this book? If it feels like there's a lot to take in, remember to go at your own pace. Transforming kids from a little fussy eater into big confident foody is a journey, not a sprint. Trust yourself, and trust your little ones, you are already doing amazing!

To make things even easier, here are 17 quick-reference prompts to keep handy. Think of them as trusty tools in your back pocket, ready to pull out whenever you need a little boost or reminder. Use them as often as you like, whether it's in the middle of a mealtime challenge or just to add some fun to the table!

1 – Healthy Food is Boring

Children are born with a natural sweet tooth, which means they're more likely to turn up their nose at bitter veggies like broccoli. Try pairing new flavours with familiar sweet ones to make savoury foods appealing

2 – Spotting the Fussiness Signs

Fussy eating usually starts around 18 months and has more to do with a child's development than the food itself. Watch for food rejection, dramatic reactions, or sudden preferences for a narrow menu.

3 – Why the Fuss

Fussiness can stem from adult-led factors (like structure or pressure), child-led reasons (such as tiredness or food neophobia), or even medical factors. Figuring out the “why” helps you choose the best strategy to keep things on track. Keep a food diary to help to spot patterns and any changes in eating habits.

4 – Slow & Steady Wins the Taste

The world of food is vast, but you don’t have to introduce it all at once! Try dividing the plate with familiar and new foods, or feature a “star food of the week” for a slow and steady taste test approach

5 – 15 Tries to Food Success

Keep offering new foods, even if they’re met with “no thanks” at first. Kids may need to try something at least 15 times before they accept it, so patience is key!

6 – Two-Options Rule

Offering two choices allows kids to feel empowered without being overwhelmed. Once they pick, though, try not to resort to plan b or c if they change their mind. Another meal will come around soon enough!

7 - Serve Family Style

This is a great social way of dining, think tapas for kids. Pop all the food available in the middle of the table, including dessert, and let everyone help themselves. Dessert first? No problem. Carrots in sandwiches? Delicious! Let them decide and go with it.

8 – Let Dessert be Ordinary

Serving dessert even if they don't finish their main course removes its “forbidden fruit” appeal. When treats are treated as just food, mealtime can feel a lot more relaxed. Food is food, try not to make some feel like the prized treasure.

9 – The Beautiful Mess

Children explore food with all five senses, squishing, sniffing, even listening! Embrace the mess, as sensory eating builds comfort and curiosity around food.

10 – Routine, Routine, Routine

Most children thrive in routine and familiarity, and this is the same for eating. Set a schedule of three meals and two to three snack times a day, create a familiar routine, and keep each opportunity to eat to around 20-30 minutes to avoid boredom.

11 – Eat, Chat, Relax, Repeat

Create a relaxed environment around the dinner table to help children feel good about eating. Try to sit and eat together, talk about the day, and avoid distractions.

12 – You Do Your Part, I’ll Do Mine

Having clear meal and snack time roles makes eating simpler. Adults decide the “when, what, where,” while kids get to decide the “if and how much”, a partnership, with shared responsibilities that grows healthy food foundations and relationships.

13 – Team Effort from Cart to Table

Use a weekly planner to help decide meals for the day, choose recipes, go shopping for ingredients, stirring the pot, and cook together. The journey from shopping cart to table helps children feel much more involved in decision-making and invested in eating the end products

14 – Play and Learn about Food

Attempting to have an educational discussion about food whilst eating is not the time or the place. Use opportunities in-between meal and snack time for playtime to teach kids about food through games, charts, and role-play. When food is fun, kids are more likely to stay curious.

15 – Mindful Munching

Instead of pushing for “just one more bite,” let kids follow their own hunger cues to tell you when they are hungry or full and build a healthy relationship with food

16 – Perfect Portions

Nutrient-rich foods like fruits, veggies, proteins, and carbs all have a place on their plate. Aim for two to three of these groups at each meal, in kid-friendly portion sizes. Smaller portions allow kids to ask for seconds without feeling overwhelmed.

17 – Hydration Station

Hydration is essential for health, energy, and digestion. Always have water available, and make it more fun with a favourite cup at each meal and snack.

And Finally...

As we come to the end of this journey, remember that each child is unique, with their own tastes and pace of growth. Fussy eating is common during the early years, and with patience, creativity, and a dash of humour, you'll see your little one's friendship with food grow.

Remember, you're not alone on this journey. The world of fussy eating may sometimes feel overwhelming, but there's always support, inspiration, and laughter to be found. As you embark on this food adventure, embrace the mess, chaos and interesting chats along the way. Meal and snack times won't always go as planned, but with a flexible approach, you'll foster a positive food journey for your little one. Celebrate the small wins and remember to be kind to yourself.

You're doing an amazing job!

Takeaways for a Successful Journey

- Be clear in your role and your child's role, set **boundaries**, be flexible, and remember, progress doesn't happen in a straight line.
- Embrace the mess, the spills, and the giggles, it's all part of the experience to make eating **inviting**.

- **Trust** your little ones to eat and celebrate the small wins, whether it's a tiny bite of a new veggie or a proud moment of setting the table.
- And finally **explore** everything from shop, prepare and cooking together. More children are invested in the food, the more likely they will be to eat.

Closing Activity: Reflect and Reset. Take a moment to jot down any changes you've noticed since starting this journey. Have there been any breakthroughs? What's been the funniest moment so far? Use these reflections as a reminder of how far you and your little one have come and keep looking forward to each new adventure.

With love, laughter and encouragement, Jo @The Bite Club Co. Multi-award winning Child Nutrition Coach

*"Remember,
raising kids is tough,
each stage is a lesson, an
opportunity to learn and
laugh along the way.
Be kind to yourself, you are
doing a great job!"*

Afterward

Join The Bite Club Co.

Thank you

I truly hope that this book has helped, even just a little, to make meal and snack times enjoyable for you and your family. Food brings so much joy and connection, it is more than just nourishment; it's an opportunity to create precious moments together.

As an independent author, your support means the world to me. If the guidance and humour in this book have helped you and your little one on the journey from fussy to Foody, please consider leaving a review. Every review helps bring more attention to this book and makes it easier for other parents and carers to find the support they need.

Further Support

The *From Fussy to Foody* series has even more resources to help along the way, including:

- 27-Day Bite Plan
- Food Parenting Styles Guide
- Food Phrase Guide
- Kids Learn about Eating Book
- 5-5-3-2 Perfect Portions Guide

You can explore these additional resources on our website at www.thebiteclubco.com, find on Amazon and Etsy or contact us at hello@thebiteclubco.com

Join Us!

For daily hints, tips, and tricks, join the club on social media, Instagram and YouTube @thebiteclubco.

We're excited to connect with you!

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