

School Food Matters

A guide to helping cautious eaters



Introduction:

What is cautious eating?

Eating a varied diet is important for health, but this can be challenging and stressful when children and young people are cautious eaters.

Cautious eating can be defined as:

- the rejection of one or more foods
- the limited intake of a variety of foods
- frequent changes in food preferences.

Cautious eating is common in children, with fear of new foods affecting up to one in every five children, typically between 18 months and two years old, but this can persist into adolescence. (BDA, 2024)

Whilst cautious eating in children can be frustrating, it's important to understand why children find certain foods so challenging.

This guide will:

- explain the psychology of eating
- help you to understand why some children are cautious eaters
- offer top tips on how to improve children's relationship with food, including how to encourage them to try new foods
- give guidance on Ultra Processed Foods (UPFs)

Understanding why children can be cautious with food

There can be multiple reasons as to why children can be or become cautious eaters. Whilst it can be very frustrating, it's important to understand why this happens or what might have caused the change in eating habits support your children. These two pages will explore some of the reasons as to why.

Experiencing food with all the senses

We experience food with our senses. As adults, we are less sensitive to textures, flavors, and smells of food, but many children are much more sensitive.

When children are cautious eaters, the touch, taste, or smell of a food is being processed in their brain as unpleasant. Their brain is processing it all in different ways. A strong negative sensory reaction can result in a sensory meltdown.

Negative food experiences

Experiencing food poisoning or eating something that was out of date and unpleasant, can cause children to be reluctant to try new foods out of fear this will happen again. It can also cause them to go off foods which have a similar taste or texture as their brains link them together.

Children might find that food doesn't taste as they expect. For example, it's hard when it's supposed to be soft, having bones or cartilage in it unexpectedly, or they could find something like a hair in their food.

Presentation of food

Sight is one of the first ways we interact with food. Children get used to food looking and being served in a certain way, building up their food preferences. They can become stressed if a food is presented differently as, to them, this could mean it is unsafe. The way food is presented on the plate, may dictate whether it is eaten or not.

Understanding why children can be cautious with food

Personality, age or developmental stage

Children can become cautious eaters as they grow and develop. This can be caused by a change in their taste, but also due to environmental factors such as peer pressure, changes in home life or general environment and or stress.

It's important not to be discouraged if they go off certain foods or become more cautious. Carry on offering the foods where possible or take a break from certain foods and try again later.

Food and emotions

Increased stress, chaos and noise around mealtimes have been linked to an increase in food refusal and greater use of food to regulate negative emotions in children.

Sugary or salty foods provide a quick dopamine release which our brains love. When we use food emotionally it can be more difficult to listen to our internal hunger cues. It creates a reliance on foods that provide a quick dopamine release!

Perception of food: what they see versus what you see

How we perceive food varies between cultures, ages and social norms. For example, in many cultures, fish eyes are a delicacy or eating insects is a part of people's daily diets. This can be the same for many children when they experience food, for example dried fruit may look appealing to you but for some children it may look disgusting.

A note on ultra processed foods (UPFs)

In general, children love UPFs such as biscuits, fizzy drinks, sweets and crisps because they taste the same every time they are eaten. Compare this to fruits and veg which can be unpredictable. With the same fruit having a range of texture, tastes and colours. For example, some blueberries are sweet and crunchy or some are squishy or sour. It's this reliability that makes UPFs popular as our brains know they are safe to eat and will always taste the same.

These foods are often high in fat, salt and sugar and low in nutrients, such as fiber and vitamins. It's important to not become too reliant on these foods and keep offering fruit and vegetables so children are exposed to varying tastes and textures, and provided with all the nutrients they need to flourish.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Unprocessed foods	Processed cooking ingredients	Processed foods	Ultra processed foods
- fruits and vegetables - eggs - beans and pulses - meat, fish & poultry - grains such as rice	- olive oil - butter - jams - salt - pepper - spices	- cheese - tinned foods e.g. tomatoes, soups, peas - bread - pasta	- fizzy drinks - ready meals - biscuits, cakes and pastries - crisps - processed meats e.g. calami, sausages, burgers

How to improve mealtimes with cautious eaters

Create a positive environment

- Make mealtimes a family and social event. Turn off the TV and other screens and try to model good eating habits.
- Regular mealtimes helps children get used to eating at certain times of the day.
- Playing some music or a story in the background can help distract from the anxiety around eating.
- Involve children in buying and preparation of food. Children are more likely to try something if they've had a role in choosing and cooking it.

Communication around food

- Try not to categorize foods as healthy and unhealthy, or good and bad.
- Tell children about the properties certain foods have and how they help their brain/body e.g. "eating that pasta will give you energy to go and play," or "try some broccoli, it'll help your brain grow!"
- Use visual aids such as a food-group chart, explaining we need at least one food from each group each day.

Be a role model

- Share family meals with all members eating the same food.
- Parent modelling: eating fruit and vegetables and trying unfamiliar foods.
- Involve children in preparing food or buying ingredients so they become familiar around food.
- Use positive peer pressure – invite other children who are good eaters!

Promote appetite

- Limit snacks and high-energy drinks such as milk, juice and soft drinks in between meals.
- Set mealtimes, can help make sure children are not too tired or hungry to eat.
- Offer new foods at mealtimes when children are the hungriest.
- Offer small tasters of new foods away from mealtimes as part of a game or activity to ease the pressure of liking the new food

Don't give up!

Cautious eating can be challenging and it's easy only to offer foods you know children will like. However, it's important to keep going and to focus on the long-term goals of creating a healthy relationship with food. Research shows it takes 10–15 positive experiences for children to like a new food. (Taylor and Emmett, 2019)