

CHILDREN BEHAVING BADLY
Channel 4: Thursday 15th August 2002

When your child won't eat.....

Following the episode of *Children Behaving Badly* featuring children with feeding difficulties we hope that these guidelines will be helpful to parents concerned about their children's feeding habits.

The Centre would like to emphasise that these are general guidelines and they will not necessarily be applicable to all cases.

Hints and Guidelines for Toddlers, Nursery and Junior School Aged Children

Some General Facts and Principles

1. Inevitably, eating is intimately associated with the first relationship with the mother. For babies the experience of feeding and of being held/loved are closely linked. For all of us eating remains an activity that is in some way emotional as well as physical, and usually connected with relationships. For example we offer nice meals as an act of friendship and hospitality and we may lose our appetites when we are upset or eat when we are lonely.
2. Feeding oneself and playing with food are an important aspect of a child's development. Toddlers need to handle food, play at feeding mother and dolls, partly feed themselves etc even though this can be frustrating and slow for the parents/carers.
3. Self feeding, and choosing to eat or not to eat, what to eat and how much to eat, are all important means by which children develop autonomy, a sense of being separate people who can have control over their own physical and emotional boundaries. This is a necessary and important part of development.
4. Feeding good nutritious food to one's child is a central commitment of loving parents and thus a child who for some reason does not eat well can make a parent feel bad or inadequate.
5. It follows from all the above and especially from 3 and 4 that in the interaction between a parent who lovingly wishes to feed and nourish a child and a child who wishes to establish independence there is likely to be, at the very least, some tension!
6. It is also relatively easy for food to become a main currency of compliance and non compliance between a parent/carer and child. This is particularly likely to happen between a mother and child. This is a common but unhelpful development which can lead to a vicious circle - the more worried the mother gets, the more she presses the child to eat; the more the child refuses to eat, the more worried the mother gets. It is very important to try and reverse this vicious circle. Realising the truth of 7 (below) can sometimes help parents stop worrying enough to stop pressing the child to eat.

7. In virtually every case of a child with faddy eating, however extreme, the child is well nourished. It seems to be the case that children are able naturally to eat the elements of diet which they need when they self select food. This is a very reassuring fact which can be helpful for an anxious parent to remember. (This does not apply to an extremely small minority of children but in these cases expert medical help will already be involved. NB. It also does not apply to adolescents with an eating disorder.)

8. Most faddy eating does get gradually better as the child gets older and makes social contact with other children. However with some children in whom a very limited diet is well established this can persist for a very long time. Although this can sound like bad news, it can help parents to relax and accept the child as he is without trying all the time to change the situation and this in turn can be helpful to both the child and the parents.

Some Hints on Management

(please note these are general guidelines which are not intended to cover every case)

- An underlying useful rule is to make the limited eating as unimportant as possible. Try not to let it turn into an issue which preoccupies the family. Children should never be forced to eat. Neither rewards or punishments are helpful because both lead to eating becoming more of a battleground rather than less.
- It is helpful if a family eat together for at least one meal a day. Food which is generally 'child friendly' but also acceptable to all should be served. Anyone (child or adult) who refuses a course or an item or asks for a small helping should be allowed this. If a meal is not finished by anyone, remove the plate without comment, after checking that they have finished. The next course should not be withheld from someone who has not eaten the first but should be handled the same way. Everyone in the family should have their particular favorites and dislikes acknowledged and worked around.
- It is not helpful to get in a situation where the child refuses a meal, the parent asks what he wants instead and produces what he specifies, then the child often as not refuses that too. This is about controlling the parents and not about choosing something to eat. Better to try and accept that you really don't have to make your child eat.
- It is helpful for parents and other adults to all take the same line. Feeding can become an issue where a child plays off mum against dad or gran against his parents. It may take quite a lot of private discussion between the involved adults (not in front of the child) to resolve their own differences and establish a common strategy.
- If you have a child who is already entrenched in a position of refusing anything but a very limited selection of food items then it is probably most helpful to provide these for this child, but at the table while others eat normally. The rest of the family should try as far as possible to behave in a matter-of-fact way so that the special food of the child with the difficulty is a non issue which really does not interest anyone, either positively or negatively.
- If, and only if, the child himself is unhappy about his limited eating but expresses anxiety about extending his range of foods, then some supportive help about gradually trying new items may be useful. However, this should not be pressed on the child, only offered if he asks.

- Most growing children need some drinks/snacks between meals and a child whose diet is limited is the same, normal snack should not be withheld as a punishment for not eating a meal. However, with a child who eats very little but drinks a lot of milk some 'fine tuning' may be helpful. It is difficult because of course milk is nutritious and it is useful for him to drink milk if he eats little. At the same time milk is filling and the milk consumption will prevent him being hungry enough to eat. Because milk is the food of babyhood, in some children a large milk consumption at the expense of solid food can be related to a reluctance to give up drinking as a baby rather than chewing as a child. In these cases a gradual reduction of milk, perhaps by gradually diluting it with water, can be helpful so that the child does become hungry. Sympathetic comments can be made to such a child about his wish to still have only milk like a baby but how exciting it can be to be a big boy (girl) and try new grown up foods.
- If the child's eating difficulty does seem to be related to a reluctance to progress beyond babyhood as far as eating is concerned, a bit of 'soul searching' by the mother may be useful to see if it may be that she too is finding it hard allowing him to leave babyhood. Children often pick up very subtle clues about their mother's attitudes and behave accordingly. Similarly, if either of the parents have particular anxieties of their own about food, anxieties which may go back a long way, these can be transmitted to a child in subtle ways without anyone realising this has happened. In such a case, the parent seeking some help about his or her own anxiety can be helpful to the child.

Eating difficulties in Adolescents

In some ways in adolescence the issues of early childhood are revisited as the young person moves gradually and painfully from being a child to the full autonomy of adulthood. This means that assertions of independence over food and eating can be entirely normal. However, especially in girls, eating disorders in adolescence are not uncommon and can be very serious. Therefore the appearance of limited eating in adolescence should always be taken as potentially serious. If a young person is becoming thin, and this continues after parental comment and discussion, or if the parents know or suspect that the teenager is regularly vomiting, then professional help should always be sought through the general practitioner. Because young people with anorexia are nearly always rather resistant to getting help and often very secretive, it is essential that parents are kind but firm in insisting that external help is sought at an early stage. At best this will allow every body to be reassured and if there is a serious problem then early intervention has a better chance of success.

Links

The following Organisations also provide help and advice for worried parents:

British Nutrition Foundation

High Holborn House
52-54 High Holborn
London WC1V 6RQ
www.nutrition.org.uk

Promotes the nutritional well-being of society. The website is dedicated to food information, with useful tips on how to make food interesting for children, to encourage them to eat.

The National Childbirth Trust

Alexandra House
Oldham Terrace
Acton

London W3 6NH

Enquiry Line: 0870 444 8707 (Mondays to Thursdays 9am-5pm, Fridays 9am-4pm)

www.nct-online.org

The largest childbirth and parenting charity in Europe. It provides a range of educational and support services on antenatal (before birth), birth and postnatal (after the birth) issues.

BBC Health: Parenting — Fussy Eaters

www.bbc.co.uk/health/parenting/tofussy.shtml

Has a range of links and useful information for parents on children and eating.

National Network for Childcare

www.nncc.org

Talks about what child carers can do to get kids to eat, with lots of useful tips for anyone feeding a child.

Well Aware — Food Refusal

well-aware.co.uk

Provides a range of information and advice for healthy living. Looks at the issue of food refusal, from babies to teenagers, offering tips for parents.

Parentline

Help and Information for Parents

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

YoungMinds

Children's Mental Health Charity

www.youngminds.org.uk