

SELECTIVE EATING IN CHILDHOOD: MORE THAN JUST FUSSY?



ACROSS ALL CULTURES, ENJOYING A MEAL CAN REPRESENT MORE THAN SIMPLY CONSUMING OUR DAILY NUTRIENT REQUIREMENTS. FOOD CAN BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER, CELEBRATE AN OCCASION, CONVEY OUR FEELINGS AND IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF MANY CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES. HOWEVER, FOR SOME FAMILIES, MEAL TIMES REPRESENT A BATTLEGROUND OF DISTRESS, AVOIDANCE, AND ANXIETY WHEN CHILDREN HAVE EATING DIFFICULTIES.



Normal vs. problematic eating:

Approximately one in four children experience eating problems during early childhood with one in two families stating that their child actively avoids particular foods. These difficulties are present in some children from birth and infancy, whilst other children develop eating difficulties related to environmental or psychological triggers. Eating problems are a common challenge for many parents. However, when these behaviours are accompanied by physical health, behavioural or emotional problems or are causing significant distress to children or parents it is important for them to seek support. Without intervention, insufficient nutrient consumption can lead to delays in motor skills, speech and language development as well as stress and mental health difficulties.

Children with eating difficulties are usually restricted in either:

- The variety of foods consumed (typical description of picky eaters)
- The quantity of foods consumed (includes appetite issues, lack of interest, avoiding eating)
- The texture of foods consumed (for example, children only eating pureed or chewy foods).

Treating childhood eating difficulties:

By the time many families present for treatment, meal times are well established as a negative experience for both parents and children. Children have often developed an intense fear of foods and can become highly distressed at the sight or suggestion of new foods. Despite this, many approaches to treat feeding problems

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have purely focused on parental reinforcement. Whilst this can increase food variety and quantity, these approaches have only minimal effects on undesirable mealtime behaviours (such as food refusal, gagging and screaming), fail to address the child's genuine distress, and can logically impact a child's eating self-confidence.

In many instances, a team approach can be highly beneficial for intervening in eating difficulties. General Practitioners and Paediatricians are often the first contact and are able to assess and monitor weight, complete urine and blood tests, and address any nutritional deficiencies. Successful psychological interventions for difficult eating behaviours typically incorporates a behavioural component for parents (using rewards to motivate new eating behaviours and planned ignoring to reduce unhelpful eating behaviours such as whining, gagging or vomiting), a relaxation component for children (to reduce food-related anxiety), and a gradual exposure to new and varied foods. Dietitians are often engaged in supporting the re-introduction of foods to provide nutritional counselling to families.

Considering the impact of eating problems on a child's social and family functioning, early intervention is important to prevent these consequences as well as poor eating behaviours continuing into adulthood. Centre for Integrative Health will be conducting a series of multidisciplinary seminars for families struggling with their child's eating behaviour commencing November 2015. As part of these seminars our psychologist, Marita Cooper, will be working with families on how to reduce eating-related anxiety, supporting constructive eating beliefs, and extinguishing undesirable mealtime behaviours. Our Dietitians, who are experienced in Ellyn Sattler's methods for feeding relationships and eating competence in children, will also be educating families about the importance of nutrition, which foods to reintroduce when, and supporting healthy eating.

For more information about anything discussed in this article, any further readings, or to make an appointment with one of our psychologists, please contact the Centre on (07) 3161 0845 or info@cfih.com.au