

# Fun with Food



**Community Paediatric Occupational Therapy Department**  
[www.abm.wales.nhs.uk/childrensdevelopment](http://www.abm.wales.nhs.uk/childrensdevelopment)

# Introduction

This advice sheet provides practical advice for parents who are looking to help children who find it difficult to tolerate and accept new foods.

Children need to learn about new foods in an unthreatening way. Some children need a great deal of exposure to a food before they will consider tasting it or eating it. Mealtimes frequently are associated with expectations for eating and drinking. Many children are on guard and spend a great deal of energy protecting themselves from new sensory experiences that feel dangerous.

## **Build Familiarity with New Sensations and New Foods through Play**

Children learn to make friends with new foods by playing with them. When they stir, pat, smear, pour, and make designs with an unfamiliar food, they experience the sensory qualities of that food. What color is it? What does it smell like? What does it feel like on the hands? Is it smooth or does it have some texture? Is it wet or dry? They may add other sensations to their play as they lick a finger or take a small taste from the spoon used for stirring. Gradually they develop the comfort to explore the food with the mouth as they begin to eat small amounts.

When food play is separate from the child's meal, children know that they are not expected to taste or eat the food. This gives them confidence and greater willingness to experience the food in other ways. Food play can begin with pretend foods such as a soft plastic apple or plastic

slices of bread and cheese. The child can explore these foods with the lips and tongue or pretend to feed them to a doll or stuffed animal. A real apple, bread, or cheese can be introduced into the play as the child becomes more comfortable and accepting of real food. Strips or small cubes of cheese can become the eyes, nose, mouth, and hair on an apple face or on a piece of bread. A boat could be hollowed out of a cucumber or courgette with an older child. The emphasis is entirely on the familiarization that comes through play. If adults try to convince children to take a bite of the food, they may become suspicious that the adult has an ulterior motive. They begin to see the situation as another trick to get them to eat rather than enjoyable food exploration.

Some children need the opportunity to stir and mix food and smear it on the highchair tray as a preparation for taking a spoonful. Small amounts of food play at mealtimes are very appropriate for young children who missed this stage of development when they were infants. Once the child has become familiar with the food through play, introduce it as part of the meal.

Here are some tips to help and encourage you and your child to keep on having Fun with Food:

1. Do something Fun with Food at least twice a week.
2. Don't pressure your child to eat what they're playing with BUT...
3. ... give lots of praise for LOOKING, TOUCHING, SMELLING, LICKING, or TASTING. They are all important steps on the road to trying new foods.

4. Don't use food that you wouldn't eat – you can't expect your child to try something if you won't eat it yourself.
5. Show them that the food is OK to eat by trying some of what's being played with – but don't try to insist your child try's it.
6. Don't wipe their hands or face or the table until the end of the session.
7. HAVE FUN...

Ref: <http://www.new-vis.com/fym/papers/p-feed13.htm>.  
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