Supporting Food Preferences, Food Acceptance, and Food Diversity



It is normal for children's food preferences to shift during early childhood.

A toddler who once ate a wide variety may suddenly become more selective; a preschooler may step back from yesterday's favourite. These changes may prompt questions from families and educators, but they are typical signs of learning, development, growing autonomy, and sensory exploration.

Strategies to support food preferences, food acceptance and food diversity

Create a relaxed mealtime atmosphere and recognise that children eat at different speeds.

- Children may eat at different speeds; some are slow, and some are fast.
- The intent is not that every meal has to be enjoyable or exciting, but that mealtimes feel safe, respectful and unhurried. This may help children feel safe to explore new and familiar foods and to interact positively with others at the table.

Provide regular and repeated exposure to a variety of foods, without any pressure to eat.

- This can help a child to learn to accept different foods through using their senses (looking, touching, smelling, tasting, etc.)

Give opportunities for children to enjoy food with all of their senses during mealtimes – this includes allowing children to eat with their hands if they want.

- Mess at mealtimes can be very stressful – 'playing' with food to become familiar with it, throwing and squishing food, touching household items with messy hands can all make mealtimes a difficult experience for adults.
  - To minimise mess, consider ideas such as a messy mat on the floor under children's seats.
- Although it can be stressful, mess is almost inevitable when children are learning to eat for themselves, and can support their development of feeding skills.

Where possible, eat meals with children and foster shared mealtimes.

- When adults eat similar foods to the children, it can support children to feel safe trying and tasting those foods; however, this is not always possible and should never be forced.
- Drinking water and engaging in conversation during mealtimes still provides role-modelling of positive behaviours.
- When adults are eating different foods, due to preferences, practical barriers, or special dietary needs (e.g. allergies, cultural or religious requirements) – this can be briefly and neutrally explained (e.g. 'My food looks a bit different today because of my allergy to milk).

When practical, allow children to choose what they eat and how much they eat.

- From the foods and drinks that are offered, children can choose what they eat and how much they eat, without any coercion or pressure to taste or finish anything.
- Remember that a) tastes can change over time and that b) some children need to be exposed to a food many times before they might accept it.
- Regular exposure can include seeing a food on the table, serving it, smelling it or touching it, as well as tasting it; all of these count as part of learning about that food.
- Offer small amounts of unfamiliar foods alongside familiar, accepted foods, so children can explore them at their own pace.

Use neutral language when talking about food.

- Use language that leaves room for preferences to change, such as 'they didn't choose carrots today' rather than 'they don't like carrots', and avoid terms such as 'picky eater' as children's food preferences are still developing.

Give children opportunities to learn how to approach food they are not sure about, how to refuse food, and how to decide against finishing a food if they don't like the taste/texture.

- Explicitly teach 'trying steps' and refusal phrases so children can safely approach unfamiliar foods (e.g., 'you can look, smell, touch, then decide'; 'no thank you'/'not today'/'can I have a little bit to try?').

Ensure that any feedback is specific to the child, individualised, and not value-labelled.

- Ensure that any encouragement during mealtimes is not related to amounts or types of foods eaten – keep it task-based, e.g. 'I noticed you were eating so well with your spoon today', rather than 'Good job for eating all of your broccoli'.
- Encourage rather than praise children when exploring new foods.

Model authentic enjoyment of food when appropriate.

Sit, be present and actively engage with children.

Engage sensory experiences by describing foods and asking about sensory characteristics of food.

- Use 'sensory talk' at the table (look, smell, feel, sound) to describe foods without pressure to taste (e.g., 'I love the way the broccoli is crunchy, do you like it crunchy or do you like it soft when it is cooked?').
- Ask simple, choice-based sensory questions to build curiosity and vocabulary (e.g., 'is it smooth or bumpy?' 'does it smell strong or mild?' 'would you like to touch it with your finger or your spoon?').

This information has been sourced from the Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment.

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