



# You can



# Find the right seating

## Why?

Have you ever tried to have a conversation while holding your feet off the floor?

Concentrating can be harder when you are trying to do 2 things.

For kids learning to eat is a big brain challenge.

Finding a good chair can be a great way to help them to focus on eating.

## How?

Find a chair where your child has

- support under their feet
- support behind their back
- support around their sides.

You might be able to use things around the house to help like:

- pillows
- books or
- pool toys.

A small chair and table set is another idea.



## You can



# Wash up away from the table

### Why?

Not all children like having their face wiped.

If the face wiping they hate happens every day in the high chair they may want to stay away from the high chair.

### How?

You could move away from the meal spot before you clean up.

You could find out if your child can be involved wiping their own face.

You could try softer ways to wash up, for example, use soap and water instead of a rough cloth.



# You can



# Have a mealtime routine

## Why?

When children know what to expect they are more likely to follow your direction.

A good routine can help meals run more smoothly and give you more time for other things.

If your child practices a routine regularly it can help them master new skills around eating.

## What sort of routine?

A routine can be simple like washing hands before dinner. Or more complicated like:

1. starting meals at a particular time
2. setting the table
3. eating
4. cleaning the table
5. washing up.

The important thing is to decide what suits you and your family. Then try repeating it as regularly and predictably as possible.



## You can



# Have short meal times

## Why?

Eating can be tiring for children. Parents sometimes think if their child sits longer at the table they will eventually eat more.

Unfortunately this is often not the case. Kids will get tired of sitting at the table for a long time.

Eventually they may want to avoid sitting at the table if they think they are going to be there for a long time.

## How?

20 or 30 minutes is long enough for a family meal.

Some children might not even be able to sit that long.

If your child hasn't eaten their meal in 20-30 minutes you could pack it in the fridge for another time.



# You can



# Play with your food

## Why?

Kids learn through play, but it's understandable that parents can feel frustrated with food related mess.

However, without a chance to touch and interact with food, children are less likely to learn to eat it.

At times, it's important to let your child move food as they like because this is how they learn best.

You can set limits around this if needed.

## How?

Let your child be the leader.

Would they like to hold the food or touch it with their hand?

Would they like to smell it or listen to it crunch?

Your attention and involvement in their play will make them even more interested in learning about healthy foods.

We know food mess might not be an everyday thing for many families and that is OK. Some play, when it's possible, is great.



# You can



# Relax before meal times

## Why?

Eating can be a big challenge for small children.

Some days, things that you find challenging can be harder or easier.

One part of this is the thing that you do immediately before the challenge. Did you start off the challenge calm and relaxed?

If you can get your kids in a good headspace this is a good place to start.

## Sensory play

Before meals is a great time to do some sensory play. This could include

- taking a shower
- going for a walk
- spending time outside
- jumping on a trampoline
- going for a swim
- playing sport
- playdough
- colouring in

Anything that makes your child feel calm and relaxed is a good thing to do before a meal if you have time.



# You can



# Eat together

## Why?

Research has shown there are many benefits of families sharing a meal. These include children having:

- better academic performance
- higher self esteem, and
- a higher vocabulary as pre-schoolers.

Kids are more likely to eat healthy food if you are eating it.

Parents might also benefit as their meals on average have more fruits and vegetables.

## How?

Eating dinner at 5pm not appealing?

Hard to find the time to share a meal?

Here are some ideas

- Shared meals do not always have to be dinner. Could you share another meal e.g breakfast or a snack?
- Family meals do not have to be long. 20-30 minutes is plenty.
- Turning off screens, including parents' screens, can help.



# You can



# Reward your child with your time

## Why?

Food can be delicious and fun so it is natural for parents to feel that rewarding kids with food might be a kind thing to do.

Giving kids their favourite foods as a reward for eating other foods can work in the short term. It is not likely to last.

Using food as a reward has actually been shown to increase how much they dislike the food they ate before the reward. So it could make your next meal more difficult.

## How?

So if you can't use food as a reward, what is a good meal time reward? Kids naturally love your attention and praise.

Instead of saying, "if you eat that carrot I will give you an icecream," you could try, "hey, you picked up your carrot!"

Other suggestions for meal time rewards include

- being present during meal times
- eating together, or
- offering to help your child eat if they need it.



# You can



# Decide what's on the menu

## Why?

We'd love healthy food to be your favourite food but there is no denying it - sometimes junk foods can be delicious.

We are biologically wired to prefer sweet food. This was a more useful thing when sweet food was not very available.

These days sweet and high energy food is everywhere.

If they have the choice kids might prefer to eat just lollies or just milk. That's why we think what goes on the plate should be up to you.

## Things to try

- Offer any choices within a single food group e.g. "Would you like peas or carrots?"
- Allow your child to decide how much they want to eat.
- If your child is a very fussy eater, you might include foods you know they will eat with other new foods. Let your child decide how much of each food they will have. This is probably more effective than offering an alternative meal if your child refuses to eat.



# You can



# Focus on food

## Why focus on food?

Learning to eat is really hard work. It is understandable if parents underestimate how hard it is. After all, we have been eating all our lives so it is easy for us.

There is much more brain work needed in this learning process. Children need to use all their senses and form new pathways in their brain.

Some children will eat more when the TV is on. Unfortunately, if the TV is on they won't be learning as much about the food and how to eat. The next time they try to eat without the TV they might find it hard.

Quiet meals with fewer distractions offer the best opportunity to learn.

Start small if you are moving away from using distractions at meal times

## How?

Start small if you are moving away from using distractions at meal times. You don't have to change everything straight away.

If possible turn off the TV and radio at meal times, and find a quiet space to eat together.



# You can



# Keep trying with new foods

## Why?

Did you know it can take kids 10-15 exposures of a new food before they are likely to eat it?

The exposure might be things like touching the food, watching other people eat the food or smelling the food.

Some parents offer foods 2 or 3 times and think, “my child doesn’t like this” if they do not eat it. But that may not be true.

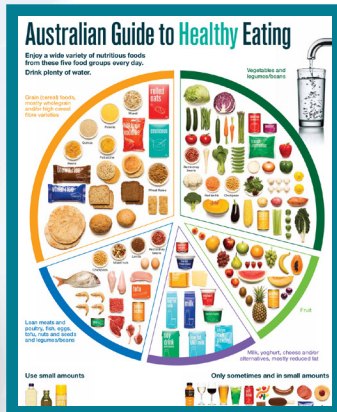
More practice can help children feel confident with their new foods.

## You could try...

- Not pressuring children to eat new foods right away.
- Offering small amounts of new foods so that it is not wasted.
- Offering the same food several times before you decide whether they like it.
- Starting to offer lots of different types of food when your child is younger than 1 year old, as they are most likely to accept new foods then.
- Offering foods in different ways e.g. raw carrot, cooked carrot, carrot in a stew.
- Activities related to food that aren’t eating, like reading or singing about healthy food.



# You can



# Include variety

## Why?

When children are learning to eat they are most likely to take on new colours, tastes and textures.

We think that there might be a window of time where they are more likely to accept new things.

If you give a variety of tastes, textures and colours at that time it can help your child have a healthy relationship with a wide variety of foods.

## How?

As soon as your child starts to eat you can give them food that is different colours and tastes.

Introduce different textures gradually as your child is ready.

Often babies will need thick puree food to make up the volume of their diet but can also try little bits of soft lumps or finger food.

Make sure any finger food is not airway shaped and your child has full control of the experience by putting the food in their own mouth.

All babies need supervision when they are eating especially when they are under 2 years.



# You can



# Give children water

## Why?

Water is the best drink for children older than 1 year.

Other drinks can fill up kids so that they do not feel like eating.

Drinking too much cow's milk has been linked to

- fussy eating
- low iron and
- constipation in children

## How?

You can encourage children to drink water by

- storing it in the fridge
- drinking it together
- pouring it into a special cup or water bottle
- having water on hand when you are playing outside
- having water at all meals



# You can



# Get help if you need it

## Why?

Some children are just more difficult to feed than others. It can be for a variety of reasons. It does not mean you have done anything wrong.

The earlier you access the help you need the faster you will see progress.

## Getting support

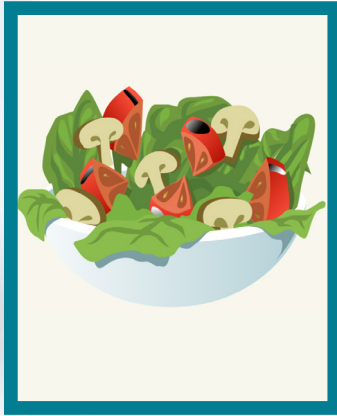
Ask for help whenever you think you need it. There are also some warning signs to look out for, including if:

- your child is not growing well
- your child has a very limited range of foods they will eat e.g fewer than 30 foods
- you or your child are very distressed at meal times
- your child eats badly when anyone tries to feed them.

A good place to start getting help is with your GP, Aboriginal Health Practitioner or Child Health Nurse. They will be able to refer you on if you need more specific help.



# You can



# Let your child skip a meal

## Why?

Parents often worry about their children not eating enough. However, there are lots of reasons a child might not eat.

They could be tired or they could be full from an earlier snack.

If your child is growing well and usually eats, a missed meal is likely not a problem.

Children often eat the right amount for them over a week rather than at a particular meal.

## Tips

- Leave a gap of 2-3 hours between meals where you do not give any food. This gives children time to get hungry.
- You could try giving healthy food such as vegetables first when children are most hungry.
- If your child is regularly refusing meals or not growing well, it is important to talk to a health professional about this.