

FOOD AVERSION

Eating is more than just putting food in your mouth, it is a gradual learning process. For children with food aversions, this process can look different from typical picky eating, often requiring small, manageable steps before they feel comfortable trying new foods. Over time, repeated exposure can help build trust and acceptance. Children may move through several stages before they are ready to eat a food, and each step is meaningful, sometimes needing days or weeks of practice as comfort and enjoyment grow.

Making feeding a positive experience is key to building trust with your child. The language you use during meals plays an important role. While it may be tempting to say things like “try it” or “just take a bite,” these phrases can create pressure and may undermine trust. Instead, aim to keep mealtimes relaxed, supportive, and pressure-free. There are many other ways to encourage food exploration and engage your child without using directive language.

The following strategies can help support your child if they are refusing many or important foods. While these approaches can be used at mealtimes, it may be easier to initially practice during a separate snack time focused on exploring foods, without pressure to eat.

1. Tolerating (being near food)

- Your child learns to feel safe around food.
- Examples:
 - Sitting at the same table as the food
 - Having the food closer on the table or on their plate
 - Looking at the food (for example, “Can you find the red food?” or “How many colours are on your plate?”)
- There is no pressure to touch or eat. Being near food is a great first step.

2. Interacting (exploring without direct touch)

- Your child explores food in a low-pressure way.
- Examples:
 - Helping cook or set the table
 - Stirring, pouring, or serving food



- Moving food using utensils
- Focus on play and exploration, not eating.

3. Smelling

- Your child starts to notice and tolerate the smell of food.
- Examples:
 - Smelling food from a distance
 - Leaning in to sniff (for example, “Which foods smell stronger?”, or playing “guess the food” with eyes closed)
- Smelling is an important sensory step.

4. Touching

- Your child becomes comfortable feeling food.
- Examples:
 - Bringing food close to the body and then touching with hands and body
 - Touching food with one finger, then the whole hand (for example, exploring textures like squishy, crunchy, sticky, etc.)
 - Touching food on upper body areas such as the arms, shoulders, chest, and neck (for example, balancing a cracker on their shoulder)
 - Playing with food (for example, yogurt or pudding as “paint”, or building towers with cucumber slices)
 - Adding playful sound effects (like “boop”) or making the food move in fun ways, such as hopping like a bunny
 - Bringing food close to the face and then touching facial features with it
 - Touching food to parts of the face such as the chin, cheeks, nose, tongue, and lips (for example, “kissing” the food)
- Messy play is a normal part of learning.

5. Tasting (no pressure to swallow)

- Your child tries the food in their mouth.
- Examples:
 - Licking the food
 - Taking a bite and spitting it out

- Holding food in the mouth briefly to notice taste or texture (for example, “Is it sweet, salty, sour, or crunchy?”)
- Spitting out food is part of learning. Including positive language throughout the experience is important.

6. Eating

- Your child begins to chew and swallow food.
- Examples:
 - Chewing and swallowing small amounts
 - Fully chewing and swallowing independently
- This is the final step, not the starting point. It takes time and practice.

Progress might look small, but every step counts. A child who goes from looking at food to touching it is making real progress toward eating!

- Follow your child’s pace, don’t rush steps
- Celebrate tiny wins (even smelling or touching)
- Offer foods again and again without forcing
- Model eating the same foods

For more information about the various steps to eating, please refer to [Stargold the Food Fairy’s 32 Steps to Eating Resource](#).

SUPPORTING OLDER CHILDREN WITH FOOD AVERSIONS

If play based strategies are not appropriate for your child’s age or development, the following strategies are examples of other ways to support them in building comfort with new foods. Older children often benefit from being more involved, informed, and in control of the process.

Involve your child in food choices

- Include your child in grocery shopping and meal planning
- Encourage them to choose one new or non-preferred food to work on at a time
- Offer structured choices (for example, “Do you want to work on carrots or cucumbers this week?”)



Encourage participation in food preparation

- Have your child help wash, chop, cook, or serve foods
- Encourage them to prepare foods in different ways (for example, raw, roasted, with dip)
- Let them build their own plate, including at least one “learning food”
- Involve your child in gardening and harvesting their own foods

Track progress

- Create a simple chart to track steps such as looking, touching, tasting, and eating
- Set small, specific goals (for example, “smell the food” or “take a small lick”)
- Review progress regularly and celebrate each step forward

Build understanding of nutrition

- Talk about how different foods help the body (for example, protein for strength, fruits and vegetables for health)
- Connect food to your child’s interests (for example, sports, energy, focus at school)

Use supportive language

- Use neutral, supportive phrases like “you can explore the food in your own way” or “what step feels okay for you today?”
- Praise effort rather than outcome (for example, “you did a great job placing your teeth on that food”)

Sometimes, even with steady support and the best strategies, feeding aversions can take time to improve or may not change quickly. This does not mean you are doing anything wrong. Feeding challenges can be complex, and progress is often slow and not linear. It is common for parents to feel discouraged or guilty, but these feelings are understandable and you are not alone in them.

Additional Resources

- [My Munch Bug Toolbox - Melanie Potock](#)