



Yummy - yummy, dinner time!

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Food, glorious food. Parents are often guilty of over-complicating their child's relationship with food. However, it is a two-way relationship where ideally the parent is the facilitator and aims to foster a positive and healthy relationship with food although is often a lot more challenging than it sounds!

Many children express their independence through food and eating habits from a very young age. We are all familiar with a young child sealing their lips and turning their head away, spitting out food and then progressing to, "Yuck, I'm not eating that!" although the child ate this very same meal the previous week and adored it. Some children refuse to sit at the table often resulting in a game of cat and mouse chase. If we are honest, we can probably remember our parents having similar mealtime antics with us as young children!

Mealtimes can often become more stressful than they should be with both parent and children running out of steam at the end of their tethers! It can often escalate if adults are under time pressure or are tired at the end of a long day. We could all use some simple steps to take the angst out of mealtimes.

Firstly, stop and consider the situation, and ask who or what is contributing to the pressure around mealtimes. Accept that young children are finding their feet in life, learning what they like and don't like. Often the food that was a favourite yesterday becomes today's untouchable! They may simply decide that they no longer

enjoy the taste or texture. This can be quite frustrating for parents, but from a developmental perspective this is fantastic! Your child is learning about control, decision making and self-expression. That does not make it any easier for parents and carers. We can help support children understand mealtimes, meal etiquette and the relationship with food making it a fun, family time together where both children and parents enjoy and create happy memories.

• **Social Occasion** The most important conversations of the day happen at mealtimes. It is one of the times our day that we stop and have a meaningful conversation with our family and friends. It is also a great way to create social skills and to listen and learn about your child's day. From about the age of three, children understand and enjoy this two-way conversation opportunity. Building this social time into your child's routine is embedding the importance of mealtimes.

• **Time** Many parents can often find themselves time poor. Young children do not understand the concept of time and by not planning and giving yourself sufficient time. This can create an indirect pressure on your child. Try as much as possible to give yourself an extra few minutes to prepare in the morning so that breakfast can be enjoyed and not rushed. This is often children's favourite meal of the day with some children even requesting cereal for lunch and dinner!

• **Fussy eaters** Where possible, try to avoid cooking different meals. We all have our favourite dinner, but it is not practical to cook



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several different meal options for everyone in the family. It is both demanding on time and finances. Try to encourage all members of the family to try a taste of everything that is on their plate!

- **Little Chefs** Children love to get involved in food preparation – especially young children. It provides them with the opportunity to feel in control and part of the decision-making process towards food. And of course, they love to eat the end result if you are baking together! You are teaching them life skills and creating wonderful memories together. You would be amazed at the conversations that occur during this process and the spark of interest in our future foodies.

So many parents worry about the balance in their child's diet. Are they eating enough? Are all the food groups represented? Is there enough variety? Are they eating enough fruit and vegetables? The HSE guidelines provide a useful guide for parents on a healthy diet for young children. The guidelines state that children aged 1 to 4 years old eat 3 meals a day and offered between 2 and 3 snacks.

Ideally these meals should include the following:

Food group	Children Age 1 – 2 Servings per day	Children Age 3 – 4 Servings per day
Cereals, Bread, Pastas and Rice	3 to 4 servings a day	4 to 6 servings a day
Vegetables, Fruit and Salads	2 to 3 servings a day	4 to 5 servings a day
Milk, Yogurt and Cheese	3 servings a day	3 servings a day
Meat, Poultry, Fish, Eggs, Beans & Nuts	2 servings a day	3 to 4 servings a day

As carers and parents, we are aware that children often decline to try new foods or vegetables in particular green vegetables, fish, and quite often food in sauces!! This can be due to the strong flavours and tastes from these foods, or sometimes just the colour of a vegetable or the look of a meal will be enough for a child to say no. Over time children's palettes will mature, and these foods and flavours can be reintroduced with a lot of patience and perseverance.

Fish can often be challenging to introduce into a child's diet so it might be an idea to introduce a mild tasting fish and create interest around the food. Make dinner together and try out some creative fishy dishes by marrying the foods with something that you know they love such as mashed potato. Dishes such as fish dippers enable children to get involved in the preparation of their food and the love dipping the fish pieces in egg and breadcrumbs. This whole experience is great for children's development as they are enjoying sensory interaction with food but with a purpose. This is a fabulous way to open their minds to new opportunities whilst creating the chefs of the future!

It helps to make food fun and interesting and allow your child to serve themselves if possible. As parents and carers our role is often to be brave and to encourage our children to try new things. By doing this, children will reap the longer-term rewards and form a healthy relationship with food and nourishment for life.