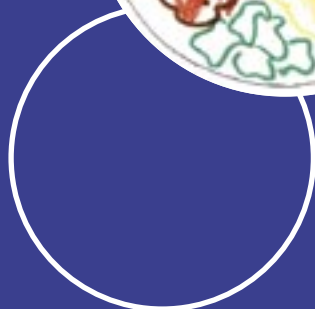


The Age of Independence

Making the Most of Mealtimes



16: THE AGE OF INDEPENDENCE

Ask parents or staff at any nursery and they will know at least one child who:

- examines the tuna sandwich before they eat it
- accepts toast only if it has the crusts cut off
- agrees to one bite of broccoli today and maybe two tomorrow
- loves carrots at the nursery but not at home
- insists on apple cut into slices not whole
- drinks milk only if they can pour it into the cup
- says "I don't like it" before even trying a new food

Sound familiar? Whilst extremely frustrating for parents and staff, be reassured that these are all part of a child's normal development!

At this age children are naturally curious and like to experiment, especially with new foods. This inquisitiveness can help them to learn by seeing, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting food. By age 2 most children have discovered that they can decide whether they want to eat or not and that they can easily control a whole mealtime! Again, these whims are normal and should be seen as part and parcel of children gaining independence. Two and 3 year olds like routine, they prefer meals and snacks at regular times every day, in familiar surroundings. This is why many insist on having their own cup or plate, or food cut into certain shapes or the same food every lunchtime.



By age 4 or 5, children like to help choose food when shopping and then help prepare and serve it. They may be more likely to try different foods, especially if their friends or family eat them too. From an early age children pick up, often subtle, messages about how others view food and attitudes to eating.

When hungry, children will focus on eating but, once satisfied, their attention begins to wander. Playing with their spoon or watching others becomes more interesting than finishing their meal or snack. Although parents may express concern that a child is a slow eater, reassure them that children at this stage have a short attention span and easily lose interest in any activity.

17: MAKING THE MOST OF MEALTIMES

Staff and parents play an important part in the development of a healthy lifestyle for children. Very young children who are not mobile and cannot vocalise their needs depend on carers to make healthy choices for them. As they grow older, children develop independence and can start to make their own choices so it is essential that they receive healthy messages early in life.

- Make mealtimes sociable. Sit with children as a group or family during meals or snacks - it's a nice time to chat and talk about likes and dislikes.
- Children will imitate important people in their life - this applies to eating and drinking habits - so be a good role model.
- Make mealtimes relaxed and calm by avoiding distractions such as television and toys.
- Try not to hurry children to eat. They are still learning to master cutlery, chew properly and explore new tastes and textures.
- Encourage children to try all the food offered to them; they will develop new tastes as they experiment and will get a more balanced diet if they eat a wide range of foods.
- Encourage good table manners as it will lead to pleasant mealtimes and develop self-esteem.
- Be patient. Children need repeated exposure to an unfamiliar food in order to learn to accept it and eat it. If an unfamiliar food is refused use gentle encouragement but do not force a child to eat. If, after encouragement, the food is still refused, take the food away without comment or a fuss - it can be offered again at a later date.
- Remember, any food fads are not likely to last any longer than a couple of weeks, so keep trying every so often with foods that have previously been refused. Try to remain as relaxed as you can when a child refuses food or a meal to avoid mealtimes becoming a battle of wits! Be reassured that most children will come to no harm by a temporary food fad even if their intake seems limited and often quite bizarre.
- Present the food in different ways, for example, offer vegetables raw instead of cooked, cut vegetables into different shapes e.g. carrot sticks or cubes instead of circles.
- Avoid using foods as rewards, for example withholding a dessert until all the vegetables are eaten may establish a preference for the dessert and a dislike of vegetables.
- Praise children when they try new foods.
- Whilst encouraging children to enjoy all food, remember they will have their own likes and dislikes, so respect individual preferences.
- Aim to give meals and snacks at regular times as much as possible.
- Remember that breakfast is a very important mealtime and gives children a good start to the day.