

General Mealtime Strategies

These are general strategies that can be helpful for young children & families, while you are waiting for further services. You might find these effective on their own, if you notice that it leads to more successful mealtimes, and your child consuming new nutritional foods. However, many whānau find that more support is needed. Please refer to [this checklist](#) to consider your child's progress.

Choose a goal for you and your child

- ✓ Set 1-2 goals for your child's eating and decide which you will tackle first. These goals may start very simple – e.g., “my child will sit at the dining table during mealtimes for at least 15 minutes”. It is important to just focus on a few small steps at a time.

Meal schedule

- ✓ Establish a meal schedule – where you teach your child to sit at the table, or another seated area at specific times. A mealtime schedule will be helped if you consistently schedule other routines (e.g., bath time, bedtime). A day should typically consist of 3 meals, and 2 snack times.
- ✓ All mealtimes should happen while your child is seated e.g., not while playing with toys on the floor or moving around the room.
- ✓ Meals should be scheduled at least 2 hours following your child's last meal/ substantial nutrition intake (e.g., formula drink).
- ✓ Identify the foods that your child prefers. To start with, use the child's preferred foods while you teach your child to eat at consistent times.
- ✓ Provide your child with food or drinks at these meal and snack times, and only allow water in between.
- ✓ Plan for successful transitions to the table by ensuring your child is prepped ahead of time (e.g., 5-10 min). It can be helpful to end highly preferred activities (TV, iPad games) at least 10 minutes before the mealtime.

Meal setting

- ✓ Meals should take place in a regular dining area, with appropriate seating for your child.
- ✓ It may be helpful for your child to associate certain visual cues with eating. For example, a similar bib and placemat.
- ✓ The eating area should be as positive as possible. Do not present your child with other negative events in this area (e.g., if your child resists medication, provide this away from the eating area).
- ✓ Eat at the same time as your child to model eating. Even if it is only a small meal, it is helpful to eat, especially the food/kai that you would like your child to eat. Encourage siblings or other family members to also model eating.

Duration of meals

- ✓ A reasonable eating period is 20 min for meals, and 10 min for snacks. However, this may start with only a few minutes, particularly if your child completely refuses to sit at the table.
- ✓ If your child refuses to sit at mealtimes, it may be helpful to encourage sitting for brief periods, with the use of a timer to signal the end of the meal. The time can be increased after every few meals that your child sits successfully, in small steps (e.g., 5 min, 7 min, 10 min).

Further resources:

<https://www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/home-plate-pediatric-feeding-disorders-program-blog>
<https://www.allyoucaneatkids.co.nz/family-resources>

Interacting with your child during meals

- ✓ Provide consistent instructions at each meal. Use visual cues if needed. If you present an instruction as a question (“Do you want to try ___”), respect your child’s response if “no”.
- ✓ Try to provide your child with regular choices. For example, choice of cup, utensil, or foods. It is important to provide choices between a few options, for example “You can choose strawberry or vanilla yoghurt”, not “what kind of foods would you like today?” Respect your child’s choice.
- ✓ Encourage your child’s general communication regarding food e.g. (“I’m hungry, I’m full, this tastes like ___”).
- ✓ Try to provide praise as much as possible for appropriate mealtime behaviours (sitting, interactions, tasting foods, consuming foods). This should be provided immediately upon your child engaging in the behaviour. For example, you may provide energetic praise for very small steps, such as taking a small bite of a new food (tickles, “Wow! you just tasted banana!!!”).
- ✓ Try to not provide attention to when food is not eaten or any problem behaviours (don’t coax negotiate if your child spits out food or refuses to eat it). Your statements should remain calm and focus on the mealtime expectation (e.g., “we have 5 minutes left of snack time”)
- ✓ Depending on your child’s ability, you may encourage them to participate in mealtime preparation (e.g., putting foods on the plate), setting the table, and grocery shopping
- ✓ You might have found that activities or items help to motivate or distract your child during meals (e.g., TV on). These may be effective in the short-term, but it is recommended to seek support to fade these out.

Introducing new foods

- ✓ Prior to new foods, you should have a positive meal routine in place (see above steps)
- ✓ Focus on foods that you and your family regularly eat. Your child may be able to choose new foods (at supermarket, visual list), but these should be from your family food options.
- ✓ If your child refuses previously consumed foods, it may be best to re-introduce these foods first before attempting novel foods.
- ✓ Introducing new foods should be done in small steps. For example, you may present a pea-sized amount of food on a spoon or cut foods into tiny pieces. You can leave a small amount of the new food on their plate (or separate plate). Try to provide repetition with new foods.
- ✓ Introduce new foods at home with familiar & supportive people. Avoid times in the community or when you have visitors.
- ✓ A new bite of food may be offered at different times to your child’s regular mealtimes, as part of short “practice sessions”. You can teach your child that the session ends when reach their goal regarding a new food (this may be set at tasting or taking one bite initially). When your child reliably accepts the new food, it can be introduced into regular mealtimes.
- ✓ Unless your child has a significant medical risk with specific foods (e.g., allergies), do not use language that indicates that food is “safe” or “unsafe”. Language about new foods should be neutral/positive (e.g., ‘new, goal, foods we’re trying’).
- ✓ Depending on your child’s understanding, incentive charts or token systems can be a useful way of reinforcing your child’s eating. You decide on a reward with your child, and what your child needs to do to earn it (e.g., bites of a new food).

Further resources:

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