

Feeding Challenges & Solutions

Foster good feeding behaviors early on using behavioral techniques

How To Promote Good Feeding Behaviors

“Addressing childhood feeding disorders is key to fostering appropriate growth and cognitive development in early life and beyond.” (Silverman, 2015)

For some mothers, mealtime can be a dreadful process filled with challenges. Childhood feeding problems range from refusal of food, disruptive mealtime behaviors, picky eating, and limited food preferences. If you are a mothers who suffers from difficulties at mealtime, you are not alone. In fact, approximately 25-45% of children experience feeding problems. Feeding problems begin to arise during the first few years of a child’s life, between 1 and 3 years old, especially during the transition from milk to solid foods. In this stage, children begin to develop increased independence from their parents. They can stall, say no to the food you offer, and refuse to obey requests. It becomes a serious problem when a



child has trouble sustaining sufficient growth, does not move from one developmental stage to another, increases the child’s risk of developing nutritional deficiencies, and mealtimes begin to cause extreme family distress.

The main concern for children with feeding problems is their nutritional status. For instance, children who have an insufficient caloric intake during this crucial period of development are at a greater risk for undernutrition which adversely impacts cognitive development, school success, attention and memory, and emotional and behavioral regulation. Majority of the time, if feeding problems are left untreated, they tend to remain over time and may progress into eating disorders in adolescence and adulthood. For all these reasons, it is important for parents to seek help and early on. In order to achieve long-term positive results, treatment of feeding problems using behavioral techniques requires teamwork between pediatricians, nutritionists, psychologists, and parents. To ensure definite results, it is essential for caregivers to be fully aware of what the behavioral theory entails and its application in real-life. **This article offers insight on simple behavioral techniques you can try at home. This information is not intended to replace professional medical advice. Always refer to your specialist with any concerns or questions.**

WHAT DOES BEHAVIORAL TREATMENT OF FEEDING DISORDERS MEAN?

Research encourages using behavioral approaches to treat feeding problems. Behavioral treatment strategies usually consist of changing the mealtime schedule, behavioral management, and parental training. Using behavioral management techniques allow us to promote adaptive feeding behaviors and reduce maladaptive feeding behaviors.

The basic components of behavior management are: identifying the targeted behavior we aim to change (i.e., rejecting vegetables). Then, picking a technique to increase or decrease behaviors that promote our feeding goals (i.e., present the vegetable until accepted). Lastly, devising a treatment plan that regularly puts together a positive reinforcer with the targeted behavior (i.e., give your child a sticker directly after they eat the vegetable).

The behavioral approach also includes strategies to enhance caregiver influence during mealtime, to increase positive feeding behaviors, and to decrease negative feeding behaviors. Majority of treatments using a behavioral approach incorporate several techniques at once.



Solutions and Strategies to Try at Home

Some children avoid eating certain foods for several reasons; either because they had a bad incident while eating it (i.e., choked while eating an apple and associated the apple with choking), or they might have been forced to eat it and associated this negative experience with the food, or because their parents indirectly reinforced them by allowing them to choose their own food every time they cry; eventually the child learns that he/she can avoid certain foods by crying. The aim of the behavioral approach is to eliminate these associations.

Strategies to use during mealtime

Start by implementing changes to the mealtime environment. It is not easy for young children to immediately change their eating habits without an incentive. It becomes easier for kids achieve a goal when they receive a reward for it. **Step 1:** Put a feeding goal and let it be realistic. Your feeding goal can start off as something small such as your child tasting the food. Later on, you can set a bigger feeding goal such as eating the whole plate. **Step 2:** Pick a reward to give your child when the goal is achieved. For example, you can clap for your child once he/she tastes the new food or you can tell your child that if he/she eats an apple, you will play with them their favorite game. The reward can be an activity that you can do together, a hug, a sticker, or offering a preferred food after he/she eats the new or non-preferred food. The important thing is that the child receives the reward directly after the feeding goal is achieved. Another useful technique could be creating a reward system with your child. Explain to them that every time they eat the

targeted food, they will receive a sticker. Once they collect five stickers, they can choose their reward. Such simple techniques motivates children and gives them a good reason to change their maladaptive feeding habits.

Know what types of foods to offer

If the reward system is not effective, you can resort to another basic technique for stopping a child's rejection to new or non-preferred foods is known as *repeated exposure*. This means repeatedly offering the food on the child's plate until accepted. Eventually, it is expected of the child to curiously try a bite of the food and might change his/her preference. In fact, evidence proves that preference for certain foods grows after ten exposures. When a child merely looks at or smells the food and expresses refusal, removing it from the plate will not allow him/her to get accustomed to it. You need to repeatedly offer the same food at meal time so children might eventually taste and change preference. This strategy must be used consistently to work.

What the mealtime schedule should be

Children's appetite is best regulated when they follow a fixed schedule of meals and snacks with no food in between in order to encourage a desire to eat. Children older than two-years-old usually eat three meals with one to three light snacks a day. For this age group, it is best schedule their meals around three to four hours apart. This time difference between each meal will induce greater hunger and result in eagerness to eat. Mealtime duration should be around 10-25 minutes. Some mothers complain about how long it takes to feed their child. The child wanders away from food and stalls which increases mealtime duration. However, mealtimes should not 30 minutes. Exceeding this time interval has been linked with feeding problems. For this reason, try to limit the time your child spends on a meal by using a timer they can understand, such as a sand-timer. The sand-timer shows the child that mealtime will soon be over and creates motivation to finish on time. After the meal is over, it is crucial not to give your child any food for at least 2 hours. Following this strategy helps create a clear understanding in the child's mind of when to eat.

To further encourage your child to eat a variety of foods, present during mealtime only a small portion of his/her preferred food up until he/she eats the non-preferred foods. For example, if your child only likes to eat baked potatoes, start by placing on his/her plate other types of vegetables. Once he/she eats the vegetables, you can then introduce a small portion of baked potatoes.

How the feeding environment should be arranged

The environment in which the child eats is extremely important to facilitate mealtime. Some mothers follow their child around the house, from one room to another while he/she plays, begging him to take a bite. If your mealtime looks like this, you need to take a step back and implement a different strategy. Following your child around to feed him/her is very wrong. Your

child must understand that food is only eaten in one place. It is best to always serve the meal in the same feeding area, to limit the number of people present, and to remove any toys or gadgets from the feeding area as they usually disturb mealtime and distract the child from focusing on the meal. You need to implement a clear structure for feeding time; only offer meals at the table, make sure your child is securely seated and strapped to his/her high chair,



and limit the number of people who feed the child to one or two people. Most importantly, make sure that the feeding area is free from any visual or auditory distractions such as TV, toys, or tablets. A distraction free area allows the child to specifically focus on the meal and their parents. If your child is refusing to eat, do not force it. Let him/her feel the natural feeling of hunger.

Often mothers find it difficult to transition their child from playtime to mealtime. The child might refuse eating and demand to continue playing. In this situation, mothers should control the type of activity the child is playing before the meal since it is directly related to how well the transition goes. For instance, if the child is playing his/her favorite activity before mealtime, he/she will refuse mealtime and insist on playing. Therefore, it is best to prevent your child from playing active or preferable activities before mealtime. Instead, encourage more quiet and less favorable activities before meal time. Another helpful strategy is creating a routine of activities you do every day before mealtime. For example, when your child is engaged in an activity and you want to begin the transition to mealtime, start by telling him/her “let us wash our hands before eating.” Having a routine allows your child to mentally prepare for mealtime. To encourage your child to finish his/her meal, plan an activity to do with your child after mealtime. For example, tell your child that after he/she finishes the plate, you will go to park.

Increase desirable feeding behaviors

In order to increase good feeding behaviors, give your child a reward (praise, sticker, or preferred food) *after* he/she completes the targeted behavior such as tasting a new food, finishing his/her plate, or eating a non-preferred food. When you reward your child for a good behavior, he/she learns to associate this behavior with a good outcome and consequently increases the probability of behaving the same way again. For younger children, receiving attention from the mother is the best reward. For older children, use a reward system that they can see and understand. For example, explain to your child that for every good feeding behavior he does, he will receive a cotton ball in a jar. Once this jar reaches ten cotton balls, he will earn a prize. In this example, the child can visually track his progress and feel encouraged to collect the ten balls.

References

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