

Exploring food

We are not born with a taste for certain types of food – it is something that develops over time, and often as a result of the different flavours and textures that we are offered in our early years.

The wider the variety of different tastes and textures that babies and young children experience when they are young, the more likely they are to eat a range of foods when they are older.



First foods (weaning)

The age at which babies are introduced to their first solid foods (weaning) varies between cultures and countries. Research into the development of babies' digestive systems has also led to guidance about when to start weaning as well as which foods to introduce first and which to avoid. It is best to seek the latest advice from your health professional.

Please note: *The information in the rest of this handout is for when you have weaned your baby.*

If you are worried that your child may have an allergy or intolerance to any particular food, then talk to your health visitor.

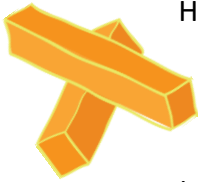
Finger foods

Babies usually show an interest in finger foods between the age of six and nine months. When they first get started it helps to lightly cook harder vegetables such as carrots to soften them and make them easier to chew.



Parents and carers often worry about their baby or young child choking on food – sitting with them while they eat will mean that you are there if they do run into difficulties.

Giving your baby/child a few different types of finger foods is a great way for them to begin making choices as they select from the foods on offer – and they'll enjoy the independence this gives them too.



Handling and picking up small items of food will help to develop your child's hand-eye coordination and strengthen the muscles in their hands and fingers. Later on, these skills will help them to hold and control pens and pencils for writing and drawing.

Finger foods can be enjoyable whatever age you are! They are a great way to explore and taste small portions of new and different types of food.

Chewing for chatting

Babies need to control lots of tiny muscles in their mouths and tongue before they can talk. Chewing will help them to exercise their jaws, and strengthens the tiny muscles in their mouth and tongue.



Being able to control these muscles will help babies to make the different shapes with their mouth and tongue that are needed to create the variety of sounds they will use to talk later on.

Chewing food strengthens the tiny mouth and tongue muscles that babies need to control before they can talk.

Developing a taste for different foods

Babies and young children take time to develop their food preferences and decided what they like or dislike – they will often favour foods that they are familiar with.



You might have experienced something similar if you have ever given up sugar in your tea or coffee. The first sugar-free cup tastes horrible, but over time it is likely that you will develop a preference for it – you may even grow to dislike the sugary version!

So just because your baby or child refuses something once, it doesn't necessarily mean that they don't like it. Offering it to them again at another time may result in a more positive response.



Babies and young children may need to experience the same 'new' food as many as 10–15 times before they develop a taste for it – or decide that they really don't like it!

Try having a 'textures and tastes party' by providing a variety of foods with different textures, tastes and colours for your child to explore.

Offering a wide variety of healthy foods from the start can help babies and young children get used to these foods and develop preferences for them. This increases the range of foods that they enjoy, and can result in them being less fussy in the future.

We are not born liking certain foods, we learn to like them.

Learning likes and dislikes

Babies and young children learn a lot by watching and copying the behaviours of those around them. Your child can pick up on how you feel about food through the things you say, as well as your facial expressions and body language.



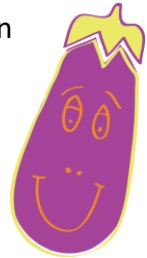
It can be helpful to hide your own dislikes of particular foods – they could well turn out to be one of your child's favourites! Try



modelling interest and curiosity when you try new foods – this will encourage your child to do the same.

Watching your child's responses to new foods or textures can often give you a clue to their likes or dislikes – perhaps a screwed up face, licking lips or spitting food out.

It is helpful to recognise their reactions and not to insist that they eat any more – you can always offer it again another time. Showing them that you are pleased that they tried something (even if they didn't like it!) will encourage them to try again.



It is better not to use food as a reward or withhold food as a punishment, as this can have a negative impact on children's approach and attitudes towards food.

Picky eaters

It is not uncommon for children to go through a stage of being picky eaters – perhaps only eating their favourite foods and refusing anything else. This can happen when they realise that their actions have an effect on those around them – and they try out their new 'powers' on you.



Young children are naturally curious so it is likely that the more they see you and other family members eating and enjoying different types of food, the more likely they are to want to join in the fun too.

If you have any concerns about your child's eating habits it is always best to seek advice from a health professional.