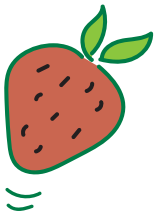
7 Top tips for sensational mealtimes

1. Avoid distractions at mealtimes. Tidy away toys and activities so that the child can focus on the food and benefit from exposure to the food even if they don't eat it.

2. Encourage the children to take part in the preparation of the mealtime by laying the table, handing out plates, cutlery and cups to their friends.



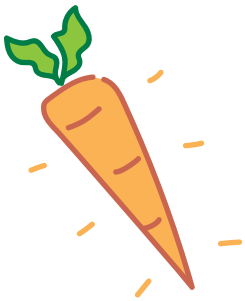
3. Ensure children are seated in groups. It can be helpful to sit reluctant eaters with children who eat well. Peers, as well as staff, are great role models so be strategic with your seating plan. It can make all the difference.

4. Offer small portions. Putting too much food on the plate can be overwhelming for a reluctant eater and may put them off before they've even tasted the food.

5. Be a good role model. Eating the food yourself, talking positively about the food and using positive body language are all ways you can offer some reassurance and encouragement to a child who may be feeling unsure about trying a food.

6. Limit mealtimes to approximately 20-30 minutes. If a child hasn't eaten much after this time, they are not likely to. Keeping a young child at the table for longer than this may lead to them feeling frustrated or anxious.

7. Allow the child to be in charge of their own appetite. Pushing, persuading or coercing a child to eat more than they are comfortable to can increase their anxiety around food/mealtimes. Remember that the goal is to offer reassurance and security at mealtimes, not to add pressure. Your role is to provide the food, but the child should be in charge of how much they want to eat. When they feel reassured, secure, and more in control of their portions they are more likely to be willing to explore new foods.



Inspirational ideas from partner nurseries

Our partners have shared lots of mealtime practice examples which have been effective in supporting food acceptance within their settings – why not give some of these a go in your setting?

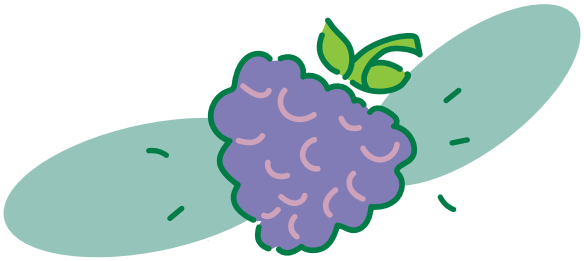
"We use tablecloths and vases of paper flowers to create a welcoming mealtime environment. This also helps to differentiate the tables from the place where children play at other times of the day. We even play classical music to further encourage a calm environment for the children."

"We serve our meals 'family-style'! Serving bowls are placed in the centre of the table and we allow children to help themselves to the food they would like. Children aren't forced to serve themselves all the foods on offer if they don't want to because we know this can increase fear and may mean they don't eat anything at all. The element of choice promotes autonomy and supports a more positive relationship with food."

"Encouraging children to be involved in the set-up of the mealtime by laying the tables and distributing plates, cups and cutlery to their friends works really well for us."

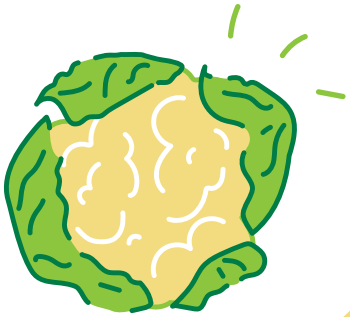
"Our number one tip is to have the team act as good role models. With everything from their facial expressions, the way they talk about the food as well as, in some cases, eating the nursery food with the children. It is wonderful to see staff supporting good eating habits through their own behaviours."

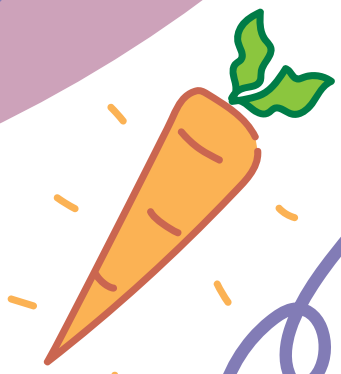
"Self-service is a helpful strategy as it not only promotes independence and supports the child's motor skills, but it also allows the child to feel more in control about what goes on their plate. This autonomy can be very powerful in reassuring a reluctant eater."



"We use conversation cards which allow staff and children to connect with one another at the table but without the focus being on the food. If children are engaged in fun and playful conversations at mealtimes, they may begin to form positive associations with mealtimes and the food served"

Some examples of conversation cards include:





- Which two animals would you take with you to the moon?
- How many peas do you think a crocodile can fit in its mouth?
- Imagine all the houses were painted the same colour. What colour would you paint them?
- What meal would you serve to your favourite superhero if they came to your house?

Research tells us that it can take between 15-20 attempts before a child will try a new food! That's why it's so important to persevere and give these mealtime tips a go.

E: hello@nurserykitchen.co.uk
W: nurserykitchen.co.uk
T: 01245 808080

NURSERY KITCHEN