



Children With Self-Restricted Diets

Many children during the pre-school years eat a limited range of foods. This is most likely to start between 18 and 30 months. Foods that the child has previously accepted are refused and the child is unwilling to try new foods.

Many children limit their food intake to those considered low quality or 'junk food', such as biscuits, crisps and frozen, processed foods. They may also eat a limited range of perceived 'healthier' foods such as yoghurt. Many are over dependant on bottles of milk and baby foods which come in pouches/sachets as the only foods they will accept.

Though this is not ideal, it is a very common phase for children to go through and most gradually start to extend the range of foods they will eat. This may take many months and can be extremely frustrating for parents.

Self-restricted eating is frequently seen in children with conditions such as Autism, it is also extremely common in typically developing children.

It is important to remember that:

- These children are not being naughty.
- It is not the parents'/carers' fault.
- It is often part of normal development

However, some children continue to struggle with eating and accept a very small range of foods beyond this typical developmental phase. This can lead to significant concerns regarding nutritional status and healthy growth.

Children with a self-restricted diet are unlikely to eat:-

- When they are hungry
- Because other people are eating
- When bribed with a reward



A helpful resource book parents might find useful is: 'Food refusal and Avoidant eating in Children, including those with Autism Spectrum Conditions' by Harris and Shea.

Please remember that just because a child has a self-restricted diet it does NOT mean that they have Autism.

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How can children with a self-restricted diet be helped?

DO NOT:

- Pressure the child to eat
- Leave the child to get hungry
- Hide or disguise food
- Force feed
- Force the child to have new/unaccepted food on their plate
- Reward with other foods
- Keep bringing back food as a meal which has been previously rejected [without having gone through stages of touch with messy play before hand]
- Focus on 'healthy eating' and the '5 a day' advice

DO:

- Always begin by accepting preferred foods/drinks, no foods are bad foods.
- Give over the counter vitamin supplements [get advice about this from your HV or pharmacist] If you are concerned regarding your child's health please consult a GP.
- 'expand sets' by making small changes help your child to try foods that are similar to ones they already eat [e.g offer strawberry jam instead of raspberry jam] – for more details see 'expanding sets' handout
- Offer new foods in a new context [e.g go strawberry picking]. Show enjoyment when you, the adult, eats new foods. Offer opportunity but no pressure to eat.
- Introduce messy play with foods away from meal times. Place new foods on a separate plate. Place new foods at a distance initially when presenting then to help your child accept these near them
- Reward your child with your time during messy play, enjoying being together with the new food to make it more acceptable to them.
- Do have opportunities to play with the new food many times, it takes multiple exposures [can be well over 50] before a child can feel comfortable with it and want to touch with their hands/lips.
- Make eating and meal times fun and enjoyable. Try to remove pressure from yourself to provide what society calls 'healthy options'. The food your child is eating/drinking is healthy as it is providing them with calories/energy.

Useful advice for parents of children with a self-restricted diet can be found on:

- <https://www.arfidawarenessuk.org/> - charity set up by parents of children with significant self restricted feeding issues
- <https://www.feedeatspeak.co.uk> - blog – fussy eating facts and fixes
- www.infantandtoddlerforum.org – resources for parents – toddlers to preschool – fussy and faddy eating in toddlers – four leaflets available
- <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/social-care/disabilities/young-people-with-disability.aspx> - Downloads - 'making sense of sensory behaviour'
- www.twinkl.co.uk – write into their search engine 'messy food play' for handouts and ideas
- <https://mymunchbug.com/> - story book for children
- <http://www.foodrefusal.co.uk/> - traded service offering families support and further training
- www.feedingtrust.org – traded service offering families support