

We all have very different tactics and parenting styles when it comes to feeding our children. These can vary from person to person and based on our day-to-day mood. Lack of sleep, energy and a child testing us at food time is no great combination for anyone. So, here is some advice and tips about how to best use certain parenting styles.

Overt or Covert?

Are you an overt or a covert parent and what on earth does this mean? Scientists have now actually grouped styles of parental feeding practices based on how we assert ourselves with our children when they are eating. These are known as covert and overt control (Table 1). Covert control is when your control over what your child is eating cannot be detected by the child¹ Overt control is when you control your child's food intake in a way that is obvious to the child.¹

Both approaches can work in practice, but the key is in the balance of their use. Parents using the more subtle covert control have been found to have children with better quality diets.² Equally, other research shows that children with overt parents are more likely to achieve their daily fruit and vegetable and dairy recommendations.³ So a sneakier 'covert' way of swaying your children towards a healthier choice can come in handy, as can the odd 'stop messing around and eat your food' too.



Table 1: Parenting Styles and Language to help Combat Fussy Eating.

Covert - Subtle Control.	Overt - Obvious Control.
Would you like spaghetti Bolognese or lasagne for tea?	We're having lasagne for dinner.
Would you like to help prepare the vegetables for your tea?	Eat three more green beans - I'm counting!
Would you like to try some of mine?	You must finish your veggies - no messing around.
Would you like to add some foods to the shopping list?	Eat your tea or no pudding!

Releasing the Pressure

Although both parenting styles can work together in a balance, putting too much overt pressure on can actually have a negative effect on your children's eating behaviours as well as the mealtime environment. Force feeding or coaxing children to eat foods, is unlikely to have much success in the long run and in fact, there is evidence that exerting pressure at meals can have lasting effects. For example, an American study⁴ of 170 college students found that recollections of parental pressures to eat and controlling feeding practices tended to stay with them even when they were much older and reached their college years!

So when it comes to tackling fussy eaters, encouraging a positive relationship with food is always going to be the best way to go. Mealtimes should be fun, enjoyable occasions – not a battleground. Therefore try to avoid putting pressure on children to simply 'eat up'. You can also take a look at our "Combating Fussy Foodies" fact sheet for top tips on handling even the fussiest of eaters.



Responsive Feeding

Responsive Feeding is a fairly new concept in nutrition and one which has become popular amongst healthcare professionals.⁵ This concept is based on communications between a child and their parent. Responsive feeding can be as simple as a parent setting up a routine and their children knowing when to expect food, fluids and play time. From the child's side, responsive feeding is about letting their parent know their feelings around mealtimes too - mainly how hungry or full they are. This two-way communication when combined with mealtime structure has been shown to work fantastically with fussy foodies, whilst also helping to put enjoyment back into food.⁶

So, if your child is turning their face away, continually pushing the plate or spoon away, or crying then it's time to respect their signals and their signs of fullness. Ultimately, responsive feeding aims to develop children's own in-built feelings of hunger and satiety and to help with regulating weight as they get older too. Children are actually very good at regulating their own appetites during weaning and beyond. It's important to avoid overriding their innate fullness signs by encouraging them to finish their plate or eat more if they are no longer hungry. Research at Queensland University⁷ has shown parents who followed their infant's cues around hunger and fullness were more likely to have children with a healthier body weight.



Conclusions

It can be frustrating when children do not eat their food and even more so if we've gone to the effort of making it extra appealing. Mixing in covert and overt parenting practices is another way to tempt our kids into gobbling up their dinner. Remember to avoid putting on too much pressure at mealtimes and focus slightly more on covert attempts. It's important to make mealtimes a positive and happy environment in order to help your child build a healthy relationship with food.

Top Tips for Parenting Fussy Foodies

1. Avoid giving meals when your child may be too tired to eat. If they are eating slowly and struggling, ask if they need help.
2. Give them some independence by getting them involved in meal prep, shopping and choices at mealtimes.
3. Avoid force feeding aka 'have one more spoon of this' or using food as a reward aka 'eat this and you can have pudding'.
4. Try sticking to the 20 minute rule – if your child is not eating their food just take it away after 20 minutes. Put it to one side (don't throw it away). If they then say they are hungry again you can try it again later.
5. Integrate some covert and overt parenting styles and see which techniques work best for you. You can also see our **Coping with Fussy Foodies**© fact sheet for more information.



Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

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Further Information: www.littlefoodie.org

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