



Happy eaters: The story behind the Child Feeding Guide

The award-winning Child Feeding Guide website, App and online training courses provide evidence-based information and support to parents, caregivers and professionals around feeding children. Academic psychologists Emma Haycraft, Gemma Witcomb, and Claire Farrow, who co-developed the resources, tell us more.

We all know children who are fussy eaters. Half of parents report having a child who is fussy, faddy or only eats a limited selection of foods.¹ Although commonplace, particularly in children aged 18-24 months,² these fussy or difficult eating behaviours are significant, and how they are managed can

I have never actually read practical, informed advice on this subject before, despite it being an issue for so many families

affect whether children outgrow them, or if the behaviours will persist over time.³ This is important because a poor diet in childhood can predict a poor diet in adulthood and is associated with obesity and a range of preventable diseases, such as diabetes and cancer.⁴ Parents have a vital role in helping their children to develop healthy eating habits but it can be stressful and worrying when their child is fussy or refuses to eat healthy foods.

There are various things that can be done to help to make mealtimes healthier for children. Health professionals are increasingly being called upon to support parents with establishing children's healthy eating habits. However, both parents and professionals have reported a lack of credible, well-informed support and advice around feeding children. This is why we created the **Child Feeding Guide**, a website and App to bring together and disseminate evidence-based information and practical support for anyone who is concerned about children's eating behaviours.

The Child Feeding Guide website and App can be useful for any practitioners working with families, both as a source of information for themselves and as a resource to share with the families at any time, for free.

How did it all begin?

We had been conducting research into children's eating behaviours for many years and found more and more evidence emerging about what parents and caregivers can or should not do, to help resolve fussy eating in children. At the same time, after having her second child (a fussy eater!), Gemma joined the team and was aware that much of what we knew from research was not being communicated to parents via the NHS or other credible sources online. We therefore felt that there was a need to develop a novel resource for parents and health professionals which brought together evidence-based information about how to respond to fussy eating, and our research confirmed that other parents agreed.⁵

What does the Child Feeding Guide do?

The Child Feeding Guide explains the science behind children's eating behaviour, allows parents to assess and monitor their own and their child's responses around food and mealtimes, and provides strategies to address fussiness in a positive way. It aims to improve children's eating behaviours and help them to establish healthy habits early on in life. It is also a valuable resource for professionals to use in supporting families, and has been developed into a successful online CPD training course for health professionals and childcare staff.

One unique feature of the Child Feeding Guide is that it describes the **five most common** feeding pitfalls that families encounter: food refusal, unhealthy food preferences, pressurising children to eat, using food as a reward, and restriction of foods. It explains **what** they are, **why** they occur, and advises parents about **what to do** when they are encountered. One such pitfall that lots of parents find worrying is food refusal. Many children go through a phase known as 'food neophobia', or fear of new foods, typically at around 18-24 months of age, becoming wary of either new foods or foods that they previously liked.⁶ While this is developmentally normal and predictable, many parents are unaware and unsure how to respond. There

is good evidence that food may need to be offered up to 15 times before children trust and are willing to taste it.⁷ Once the child deems a food to be 'safe', it can take a further 15 offerings, or 'exposures', before they develop a liking for it.⁸ It is therefore vital that parents continue to offer foods that their child dislikes, as only by increasing children's familiarity with a food will it become likely to be eaten.⁹

However, we know that parents tend not to offer young children a disliked and refused food more than around five times¹⁰ which may be related to the difficulty in keeping track of offerings or 'exposures'. In order to help with this, the **Child Feeding Guide** includes the Exposure Monitor: an interactive tool which allows parents to record how many times a food is offered to their child. We hope that this will encourage parents to continue to gently offer children healthy foods rather than assuming that the child does not like them. After setting up a personal profile on the website/App, parents can quickly and easily log each food offered, and in what way (cooked, raw, as a snack, as part of a meal, etc) and record whether their child ate or rejected it. This information is stored and enables parents to objectively monitor and review their child's exposure to different foods.

Food exposures don't have to just be part of a meal or snack, they can occur outside of meals when children may be more relaxed, for example, playing with food (e.g. messy play with cooked pasta or dried beans), singing songs about foods, or encouraging children to pick out and touch different foods when out shopping or at a market. With only one in five children consuming the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day,¹¹ the Child Feeding Guide also has sections on ways to increase children's fruit and vegetable intake, decreasing unhealthy food preferences, and encouraging reflection on when and how food is being used (e.g., to distract or to soothe).

What do users say?

The Child Feeding Guide website and App have had more than 35,000 users. Parents have reported improvements in their children's eating behaviour and also in their feeding practices:

'We have already started taking the pressure off my 4 year old son and mealtimes feel less stressful for me'

(Parent)

Fabulous, I have waited a long time for something like this

Feedback from both parents and health professionals has been overwhelmingly positive, confirming that the resources have fulfilled a need:

- 'I have **never actually read** practical, informed advice on this subject before, despite it being an issue for so many families' (*health professional*).
- 'I've already (as the mother of 4 under 6!) found some **useful hints and tips** on it' (*parent*).
- 'This is offering something **different** and something **more**' (*parent*).
- 'Fabulous, I have waited a long time for something like this' (*health professional*).

We also formally invited health professionals to review the Child Feeding Guide. Of the 21 who took part, 91% felt that it contains useful information and 95% said they would recommend it to others. Health professionals told us that they find the Guide to be valuable and useful in their everyday work with families.

A new online training course

We have run successful face-to-face training courses and have just launched an online continuing professional development training course: [Child Feeding Guide: Training for health professionals](#). With a mixture of text and videos, the online training shares the current research and scientific knowledge about child feeding and helps learners to really understand the psychology underpinning many feeding and eating problems. Learning is assessed by quizzes and reflective activities that test both knowledge and practical application. Learners will benefit not only from an increased understanding of child feeding, but also from a number of practical tips and strategies to help promote healthy eating in young children .

This training has CPD UK accreditation and will soon be available (www.bit.ly/CFGhealthprostraining).

Find out more

If you are interested in learning more about the Child Feeding Guide or training sessions, or have a question about child feeding, do get in touch: childfeeding@lboro.ac.uk.

Website: www.childfeedingguide.co.uk

Training course: www.bit.ly/CFGhealthprostraining

Twitter: @ChildFeedGuide

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ChildFeedingGuide

Dr Emma Haycraft and Dr Gemma Witcomb work at Loughborough University. Dr Claire Farrow works at Aston University. They are active researchers into children's eating and caregivers' feeding practices. They are keen to share their research findings with those who can benefit from them and regularly publish research papers, present at conferences, and share their findings in the media.

References

1. Reau NR, Senturia YD, Lebailly SA, et al. Infant and toddler feeding patterns and problems: normative data and a new direction. Pediatric Research Group. *J Dev Behav Pediatr* 1996;17:149-53.
2. Carruth BR, Ziegler PJ, Gordon A, et al. Prevalence of picky eaters among infants and toddlers and their caregivers' decisions about offering a new food. *J Am Diet Assoc* 2004;104:57-64.
3. Farrow C, Blissett J. Stability and continuity of parentally reported child eating behaviours and feeding practices from 2 to 5 years of age. *Appetite* 2012;58:151-6.
4. Nicklas TA, Hayes D. Position of the American Dietetic Association: Nutrition guidance for healthy children ages 2 to 11 years. *J Am Diet Assoc* 2008;108:1038-44.
5. Mitchell G, Farrow C, Haycraft E et al. Parental influences on children's eating behaviour and characteristics of successful parent-focussed interventions. *Appetite* 2013;60:85-94.
6. Birch LL, and Fisher JO. Development of eating behaviours among children and adolescents. *Pediatrics* 1998;101:539-49.
7. Wardle J, Carnell S, and Cooke L. Parental control over feeding and children's fruit and vegetable intake: How are they related? *J Am Diet Assoc* 2005;105:227-32.
8. Wardle J, Cooke LJ, Gibson EL, et al. Increasing children's acceptance of vegetables: A randomised trial of parent-led exposure. *Appetite* 2003;40:155-62.
9. Aldridge, VK, Dovey TM, and Halford JCG. The role of familiarity in dietary development. *Develop Review* 2009;29(1):32-44.
10. Carruth BR, Ziegler PJ, Gordon A, et al. Prevalence of picky eaters among infants and toddlers and their caregivers' decisions about offering a new food. *J Am Diet Assoc* 2014;104:57-64.
11. Health and Social Care Information Centre. *Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England 2017*.