

# Reluctant Eaters

It is common for children to go through phases where they refuse to try new foods. Don't be discouraged, here are some practical tips to help you through.

- The early learning setting is a great opportunity for children to try new foods – share your successes with parents.
- Be an enthusiastic role model – try out new and different foods together.
- Create relaxed, happy mealtimes, where everyone catches up on their day and it's not just focused on who is eating what.
- Avoid linking desserts with behaviour or as a reward for finishing or trying, as this can put desserts on a pedestal and make the other food less desirable for the child.
- Offer a variety of nourishing foods and encourage children to serve themselves where they can, choosing and controlling what goes on their plate and how much they eat.
- End the meal after a reasonable amount of time (~30 minutes) and don't insist that they 'clean the plate' as this can override their natural feelings of fullness.
- Involve children in all parts of food gathering and preparation where you can, from gardening and menu planning through to shopping and helping with cooking.
- Encourage choice between foods but set limits – for example, avoid offering alternatives at mealtimes by asking whether they would like A or B.
- A food exposure includes smell, touch and sight, not just taste. Sometimes a child needs more than 10 positive exposures to a new food before they accept it. Celebrate all positive exposures, no matter how small.
- Ask 'Would you like to try?' for unfamiliar foods and respect the child's decision if they say no.
- Be mindful of the timing of milk and snacks. If it's too close to a mealtime, they can fill small tummies, but regularly include morning and afternoon tea to provide routine. Remember, you want the child to come to the meal hungry but not starving.
- Discuss strategies with whānau so everyone agrees on a consistent approach to trying new foods.
- Offer non-food rewards for good behaviour, such as a trip to the park or choice of an activity.
- Remove distractions like toys, screens and storybooks while eating. You want children concentrating on the food and being present at mealtimes.
- If serving food, offer food in child-sized portions – a large full plate can be overwhelming, they can always ask for more food.
- When introducing unfamiliar foods pair it with a food that they are already comfortable with, for example a familiar sauce with a new vegetable.

Remember children may have varying appetites and different food preferences day-to-day. They may eat more or less at certain meals and during certain stages.

## Here are some ideas to make food fun to eat.

- Cut fruit and veggies into fingers and use yoghurt and hummus for dipping.
- Include a variety of colours, textures and shapes – a cookie cutter works well!
- Create imaginative names for foods – call broccoli 'mini trees' or carrots 'X-ray vision sticks'.
- Put elements of the meal in the middle of the table and allow everyone to serve themselves and create their own meal. Accept the mess.
- From 3-4 years, get them involved in setting the table, this will help build independence and give them a sense of contribution, you'll be amazed how the cutlery is set out!