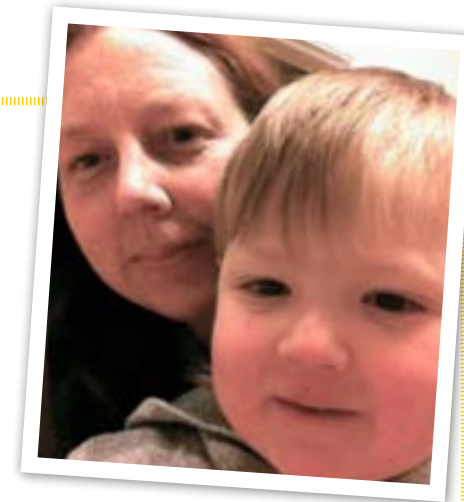


# Fight THE FUSSY EATING

Mum Gemma was despairing of 2-year-old Isaac's food refusal. We asked our expert to help her tackle his picky behaviour

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## The family

Gemma Park, 33, works in a livery yard and lives in Herefordshire with her husband Richard, 39, a lorry driver. They have three children: Freya, 5, Isaac, 2, and Edison, 17 weeks

## The problem

Isaac took a while to get into weaning, and he was about 12 months old before he started eating reasonable amounts. From then on, he was a really good eater: he was happy to eat anything, and lots of it. But since turning 2 last year, he has become increasingly fussy, especially at dinnertime. He eats a good breakfast, and is okay at lunchtime, but the only things he will eat in the evening are a roast dinner with no veg or steak with peppercorn sauce.

I cook most things from scratch, give the children a varied diet and try to stick to meals I know they like, but Isaac now refuses to eat meals he always enjoyed in the past, like spaghetti Bolognese and lasagne. He pushes his bowl away and says, "Don't like it."

We've tried changing the times of meals and cutting out his afternoon snack, but nothing we do makes any difference. I don't give him anything else if he doesn't eat what's on his plate, but he doesn't seem bothered. I'm getting quite worried that Isaac isn't getting the nutrients he needs but I don't know what else to try.



## The solution

Jo Travers is a registered dietician at The London Nutritionist (thelondonnutritionist.co.uk). She specialises in infant and child nutrition and runs clinics and workshops across London. Of fussy eaters, Jo says: "As children enter the toddler stage and become their own little people, their independence blossoms. This is an exciting stage but it can be challenging, as with new-found independence comes the desire to be their own boss. One of the few areas where a toddler can really exert control is at mealtimes, and this often manifests itself in them picking and choosing what they eat, which we call fussy eating."

## JO'S FUSSY EATER action plan

### 1 Keep your worries in perspective

"If Isaac is healthy and gaining weight, the first thing you should do is stop worrying. Although it's annoying when your child won't eat what you're giving him, it's not the end of the world, and you have time to turn things around. If your child is not gaining weight well, see your GP and ask for a referral to a dietician."

### 2 Avoid mealtimes battles

"Make mealtimes calm and relaxed, even if Isaac's behaviour is testing you. If you are stressed and angry, he will pick up on your anxiety, which could go one of two ways: either he will become anxious and end up hating mealtimes even more, or he will realise that he has found your weak spot and that he can call the shots."

### 3 Get him involved

"Often, fussy eating occurs when a child wants to control the mealtimes situation, so let Isaac have a bit of control – but on your terms. Involve him in the process of mealtimes, starting with shopping for the food, choosing what to

eat and cooking the meal. For example, once a week let him pick what the family eats; either let him have free reign, or give him a set of things to pick from, such as one meat product, one vegetable and one starchy carb. You can then shop for and cook that meal together."

### 4 Offer limited choices

"Another way to give Isaac some degree of control over what he eats is to give him a few limited choices. Offer him several foods, and let him pick what he would like to eat and how he would like it prepared. For example, would he like his carrots sliced, cut into cubes, or mashed? Be creative and make the food as fun as possible."

### 5 Involve his senses

"Sometimes children are wary of what the food will be like when it's in their mouth, particularly if they have sensitive senses and they are unfamiliar with the food. Play a game with different foods where Isaac has to guess what the food will feel like in his mouth. For example, will it be soft, crunchy or sticky? This will help him to build a memory of the food so he knows what to expect next time."



## 3 things to try today...

**1** Take some time out from mealtime stress. For a few weeks, just go with the flow and ignore any battles so that meals become a happy and positive family time.

**2** Introduce a reward chart with incentives that your child really cares about. Give lots of praise as well as rewards.

**3** Involve your child in cooking, even if he just helps you get the pasta out of the cupboard or puts the carrots in the pan. Children are often far happier to eat a meal they've helped to create.


## 6 Try getting hands on

"Help Isaac to become more familiar with food by having fun with it. Try giving him his meal on a tray and getting him to do a little finger painting with it. This works well with everything from cottage pie to soup and, as a bonus, food often gets into the child's mouth without them even noticing! The whole family can get involved, which will help to make mealtimes more enjoyable and relaxed for everyone. If Isaac doesn't like getting messy, let him wear disposable gloves or keep a bowl of water close by so that he can wash his hands frequently."

## 7 Reward positive eating


"Together with Isaac, put together a set of food challenges (such as trying one bite of everything on his plate), with rewards for completing them. It's very important to involve him in deciding what the challenges are so it doesn't become another chore that you are forcing on him. Make the rewards something he really wants, and let him decide how often he wants to attempt a challenge."

## 8 Don't offer other food


"Isaac used to eat lots of different foods but now plays up at mealtimes and pushes his plate away without eating anything. Discuss with him how mealtimes will now work calmly so he is completely clear and knows what to expect. If Isaac refuses to eat the meal that you have provided, don't offer him anything else and let him know he will have to wait until the next designated snack or mealtime for something to eat. Don't deviate from the new rules. If you are strong and confident, Isaac will soon realise that you are boss." 

## The results

**After a month, we asked Gemma whether Isaac had turned a corner with his fussy eating...**

 At first, Isaac's eating seemed to get worse rather than better. He's always been a reasonably good eater at breakfast and lunchtime, but we noticed that he started to make a fuss then, too. But Jo's advice really helped me to stop feeling so stressed about it. She made me realise that although Isaac might not have been eating well, he's a good height and weight and is full of energy, which helped to take the pressure off.

When Isaac refused to eat a meal, we kept very calm and told him that he wasn't going to get anything else. Sometimes that encouraged him to eat a bit, and other times he still insisted that he didn't want his food, but we stayed firm. We found that sometimes, if he had missed a meal, Isaac then ate better at the next mealtime.

Although Isaac's eating is still far from perfect, we have seen some progress. Being more relaxed about mealtimes seems to have shown him that he's not going to get a reaction from us, and on one occasion this week he actually cleared his plate without us having to coerce him into it. I'm now feeling more hopeful that this is just a phase he will outgrow in time – and in the meantime, I feel reassured that he's eating enough to keep him healthy and happy. 



Isaac is more relaxed, even clearing his plate at one meal