



Fussy Eating

Guidance for structured conversations with parents

When a child is very limited in the kinds of foods they will eat, it can be stressful and frustrating for parents and children alike. Tailored effective support for parents can help to broaden the range of food that their child will eat - while also improving family life and reducing stress for the whole family.

This document provides a framework to enable practitioners to provide individual support for parents and carers through two or more structured discussions. It is supported by information for parents on the HENRY website.

www.henry.org.uk/fussyeating

Discussions can be held by phone, video call or face-to-face depending on local and individual circumstances.

We recommend the following process for using this guidance to offer support around challenges with a child's eating:

1. Make contact with the parent to arrange a time to speak – suggested wording for an email or text is provided in the box below.
2. Arrange an initial phone call lasting approximately 30-45 minutes with the focus on:
 - providing an opportunity for the parent to offload their frustrations – offer plenty of empathy and understanding
 - exploring the issue together, identifying what the parent is already trying that is working and what is challenging
 - solution-spotting, using the HENRY web resource as a springboard for thinking through ideas together and inviting the parent to decide on 2-3 strategies they would like to try
 - following up via email afterwards with a summary of these strategies and re-sending the link to the HENRY web resource plus other useful resources such as the HENRY Taste Adventure chart – available at www.henry.org.uk/shop
3. 3-4 weeks later arrange a follow-up phone call lasting approximately 30 minutes to review together how they got on. This is an opportunity to:
 - build confidence by celebrating what has gone well
 - help the parent to gain further insights by unpicking what went less well and ongoing challenges
 - revisit messages or strategies
 - explore additional strategies together where useful
4. Depending on how the family is getting on, arrange one or more follow-up calls as needed.

Setting up the first contact by email or text/ sharing link to HENRY web resource

Below is some suggested wording to adapt as necessary

Dear ...

Coping with a child who eats a very limited range of foods can be very stressful - it's natural to worry if your child isn't eating well.

The link to the HENRY website below has lots of helpful information about fussy eating. I'd also like to offer you a time to talk [by phone/where if face-to-face] to explore your child's eating habits together. We can think through ideas that you feel will work for your child and help them to become more confident and adventurous around food.

www.henry.org.uk/fussyeating

If you would like to arrange a time to talk, please email me or call the number below.

Preparing for a conversation

The following resources will help you respond to questions from parents:

HENRY fussy eating web resource www.henry.org.uk/fussyeating

Chapter 11 of the HENRY practitioner best practice handbook, *A Healthy Start*

Healthy Eating Right from the Start video on HENRY website: www.henry.org.uk/videos

Things to be aware of when discussing fussy eating with parents

- Having a child who eats a limited range of food can be very stressful, and many parents worry that their child isn't getting enough to eat, or getting the nutrients they need. Having the opportunity to off-load some of these feelings early on in the conversation will help parents overcome anxiety or frustration and focus on new ideas and learning. Provide plenty of empathy and reassure parents that their worries are common and that they are not alone in sometimes struggling.
- A key aim is building parents' confidence in trying out and sticking to different strategies. Acknowledging and building on parents' strengths in a positive, non-patronising way is an important element in this – take every opportunity to highlight what parents are already doing well, and what they already know.
- The term 'fussy eating' is commonly used, but it's not always helpful – labels generally aren't. We've used it in the HENRY web resource because parents relate to it, but children are all different. Focus on helping parents think about their child as an individual with their own likes and dislikes – and with their own pace in terms of getting used to different foods.

- 'Fussy eating' is also a hot topic and parents may be feeling overwhelmed with different advice and expectations about how and what their child should be eating. 'Busting' assumptions by using empathy, finding something to agree with and then reframing will help you use a partnership approach to sharing evidence-based information, rather than simply telling. The acronym **EAR** is a useful reminder:

Empathy Agreement Reframe

For instance:

Parent: *If I can distract him he'll eat more, so we put the TV on when we sit down to eat.*

EAR response: *I can hear you're worried about Henry getting enough to eat. It's important that he has enough to grow up big and strong. Let's have a look together at some other ideas that might help.*

- If a parent is seriously concerned about whether their child is getting enough food, encourage them to discuss their concerns with a health professional.
- Parents may be focused on their child's eating behaviour and less aware of what might be contributing to their problematic attitude to food, such as mealtime atmosphere and modelling. Recognising the importance of the wider family and environment in improving their child's relationship to food and eating can be very helpful for parents – leading to new thinking about how they can start to tackle the issues they are struggling with.
- Many practitioners find it more challenging to stay in 'partnership mode' when working 1-to-1 than when facilitating a group discussion. We may find ourselves more readily coming in with suggestions, rather than holding back and allowing space for the parent's thoughts. Using the HENRY web resource as a springboard will help you 'discover' information together by exploring and reflecting on the ideas on the website. We recommend sending the link to the web resource in advance so that the parent has a chance to read and reflect on the information. If it's possible, also suggest that you each open the website page and look at it during your conversation so that you can weave the information and ideas into your discussion as you go along.

A partnership-based framework for conversations with parents

Build **rapport** – listen and show interest in the parent and in their family life e.g.

- *I bet Henry's changing fast ... what sort of things is he doing now?*
- *What about you ... how are you doing in the midst of everything that's going on?*

Gently explore the parent's experience and feelings and provide lots of **empathy**

- *So tell me a bit about Henry's eating ...*
- *How is Henry's eating affecting you – and the rest of the family?*
- *What would you describe as the main challenges at the moment?*

Start with **what parents know** and are already doing e.g.

- *Let's start with the healthy foods that Henry does enjoy – what sort of things will he eat quite happily?*
- *What else would you like him to be eating so that he's getting enough goodness?*

Build on **strengths** e.g.

- *What are you finding does work well at mealtimes?*

Use the HENRY web resource on fussy eating while you are talking so that you can **‘discover’ answers together**. Use **open questions and inviting statements** to explore the parent’s thoughts e.g.

When discussing trying new foods:

- *Let’s think about how a typical meal that Henry will eat matches the balance shown on the Eatwell Guide ... and what kind of foods you’d like to add in...*
- *I’m interested to know what you thought of some of the suggestions on the website ...*
- *Which ideas do you think might be worth trying?*
- *What will help you keep track of how many times Henry has tried a new food?*

When discussing family mealtimes:

- *Let’s talk about some of the questions that came up when you were looking at the tips ...*
- *I’m interested in your thoughts on why it’s a good idea to have regular mealtime routines ...*
- *Which ideas did you think might make a difference for your family?*
- *Let’s think about the benefits of children seeing us eat a range of different foods ...*

When discussing portion sizes:

- *What struck you when you were looking at the information about portion sizes for small children?*
- *How might children react if they feel there is too much food on their plate?*
- *How does Henry let you know when he’s full and wants to stop?*