

Morning Star Nursery – Child Feeding Policy



Setting's Name:	Morning Star Nursery
	Child feeding policy
Date Last Reviewed:	17 th February 2024
Date of Next Review:	17 th February 2025

This policy has been created to provide guidance in regard to how both practitioners and parents can work alongside one another when eating at nursery as well as home.

While pressuring a child to eat is usually done with the best of intentions, it can have unintended consequences.

Morning star Nursery aims to be good role models: (This policy works alongside the healthy eating policy.)

Children love to copy so it's important that they see good role models eating a variety of foods.

Nursery practitioners, Parents, siblings, family members, friends and even strangers can be powerful role models for children. Children learn through simply watching other people which means that our own behaviour can easily be picked up and copied by children.

In relation to eating, this means that children are likely to imitate the eating behaviours of people they spend time with. This includes parents, primary caregivers, brothers and sisters, friends and peers, as well as extended family.

Why is it important to be a good role model?

Children are like sponges, picking up habits and behaviours from those they see around them. This means that role models can play a really important part in shaping children's eating habits. Role models can come in one of two forms: healthy role models and unhealthy role models.

Research shows that children whose parents eat more fruit and vegetables typically eat more of these foods themselves, but that children whose parents eat more savoury snack foods consume more of these too.

Morning star nursery as well as parents aim to:

1. Eat together

Shared mealtimes are a great opportunity for children to pick up healthy eating habits. They can also be a chance for children to try a new food which they might see others eating and enjoying.

2. Talk about foods you enjoy

Commenting on foods that you like can help direct children's attention to that food and encourage them to try it too. For example, "Daddy really likes green beans" or "Look how crunchy these carrots are".

3. Avoid making negative comments about foods

We don't all like the same foods, and that's fine, but avoid commenting on disliked foods (e.g., "urgh, I don't like celery at all") as children are very likely to pick up on it and it can make them much less likely to want to try these foods. Keep thoughts about disliked foods to yourself.

4. Use others as good role models

Siblings, other family members or friends can be very helpful for encouraging children to try a food. Remember never to pressure or force a child to eat something s/he doesn't want to, but seeing others eating foods can help children to realise that the food is safe to eat, which can make them more willing to try it.

food as a reward can be very effective but it can have some unexpected longer term impacts so it is best avoided.

How Parents can promote positive eating

Many parents use food as a reward for good behaviour, either at the table or elsewhere. At the table, rewards are often offered in exchange for eating. Away from the table, food rewards may be offered to elicit a desired behaviour, or to avoid an undesired one. Ultimately, this is using food as a bribe.

Food is also often used to make a child 'feel better', for example, after they hurt themselves. However, using food in these ways can have a negative effect on developing preferences and future eating behaviour.

Examples of using food to control or change behaviour are:

At the table:

- "Finish your dinner and then you can have a cookie"
- "If you eat all of your peas, then you can have your pudding"
- "If you sit nicely and wait for your sister to finish eating, you can have ice cream for pudding"

Away from the table:

- "If you are good while we are at the shops, Daddy will buy you a lollipop"
- "We have to leave the park now. If you come now without crying, we can get an ice cream on the way out"

To regulate emotions:

- "Oh, that was a nasty bump. Come on, let's have a biscuit to make it all better".
- "I know you're sad. Would you like a piece of chocolate to cheer you up?"

Why is food as a reward bad?

Liking for sweet foods is present from birth and as children grow they continue to show a preference for sweet foods. This presents parents with a very easy bargaining tool which can be used in order to get their child to behave in a particular way. Many parents feel that by giving treats they are bringing happiness to their child through the pleasure of enjoying something yummy.

However, using foods as a reward, bribe, or to 'make things better' is associated with a number of less desirable outcomes.

What can I do instead?

Eating is undoubtedly an enjoyable experience. Sensory pleasure is experienced in response to liked tastes, textures, and smells, while the physiological relief from hunger brought about by eating is similarly rewarding.

If food is used as a bribe or reward, or to induce happiness, eating can become pleasurable for other reasons. This may be because of the positive feelings of achievement gained when the reward is achieved, or with the alleviation of a negative emotion. In understanding that these associations can be problematic and can lead to heightened desire for high-fat, high-sugar foods, parents should focus on learning alternative strategies for rewarding their children and dealing with negative emotions.

- **Decreased liking for non-reward foods**
When used to reward eating, liking for the food-to-be-eaten decreases. Therefore, offering a child a reward in exchange for eating their peas will not help them to like peas. Rather, they could begin to dislike them.
- **Development of an emotional crutch**
When treat foods are used to make a child feel better, children can become reliant on them to help them to regulate their emotions. This has been associated with emotion-induced overeating in later life, and can contribute to overweight and obesity.
- **Increased liking for reward foods**
Foods that are used as rewards often become extremely liked and desired more. This is because they tend to be treat foods that may be restricted at other times. As such, they become 'prized'..
- **Contribution to a poor diet**
The foods that are most often used as rewards tend to be unhealthy, sugary treats and salty snacks that can contribute to overweight, obesity, and an unhealthy diet. Regularly using these foods as rewards or bribes means that these foods become part of your child's everyday diet, which is something to be avoided.

Things that Parents can try

Offer real rewards

Offer children real, tangible objects or experiences as rewards, rather than food. For example, a sticker, a small toy, a comic, or a trip to the park. You may be surprised that your child finds these equally rewarding

1. Offer kisses, not cookies

Don't use food as a plaster or to make your child happy. Children are like sponges, not only soaking up information but learning associations that can stay with them for life. Recognise that how you deal with your child's upsets now can influence how they deal with their emotions later in life.

Many children refuse to eat certain foods and there is usually a good reason for this behaviour.

Food refusal (either the refusal of new foods or the refusal of foods that were once eaten without any fuss) reflects a basic fear response. This fear response is actually a **normal part of a child's development** and the **majority of children go through this phase**, which tends to peak around 2 years of age.

Children show this fear by refusing to taste new foods that look 'different'. This might be a food that has a colour, shape, or texture that they are not familiar with. As children become more aware of the sensory properties of foods, they also begin to scrutinise all foods that they are given.

Children might also begin refusing foods that were previously liked if they do not match with their newly-formed criteria for 'safe' foods. Children may say that they don't like the food. They might push the food away on their plates and cry if attempts are made to make them eat just a small bite. If a food is tasted, it may be refused on the basis of its sensory properties. Bitter tastes are often disliked and since many vegetables are bitter tasting these are common foods that children predictably tend to refuse.

Why do children often refuse foods?

Fear of new foods (also called *food neophobia*) is believed to be an evolutionary response that developed as a way of ensuring that our ancestors did not eat any potentially poisonous foods. Our ancestors had to scavenge for food. With no helpful packaging, use-by and best-before dates, they had to be very wary of what they were eating.

Our ancestors would have built up knowledge of which foods were safe to eat, and which were not, through associations between a food's smell and colour and what happened when they ate it. For example, whether it made them sick or not. Based on this, they could make generalisations about other foods; certain colours, smells, or textures suggesting freshness with others predicting danger.

The colour and taste of an apple, for example, would indicate whether it was fresh (green/red and sweet) or whether it had gone bad (brown and bitter). Therefore, our ancestors relied on the look, smell, and taste properties of a food to indicate safety. Unfortunately, since many vegetables have a naturally bitter taste, this is one food group where the process of neophobia can hinder the development of a healthy diet.

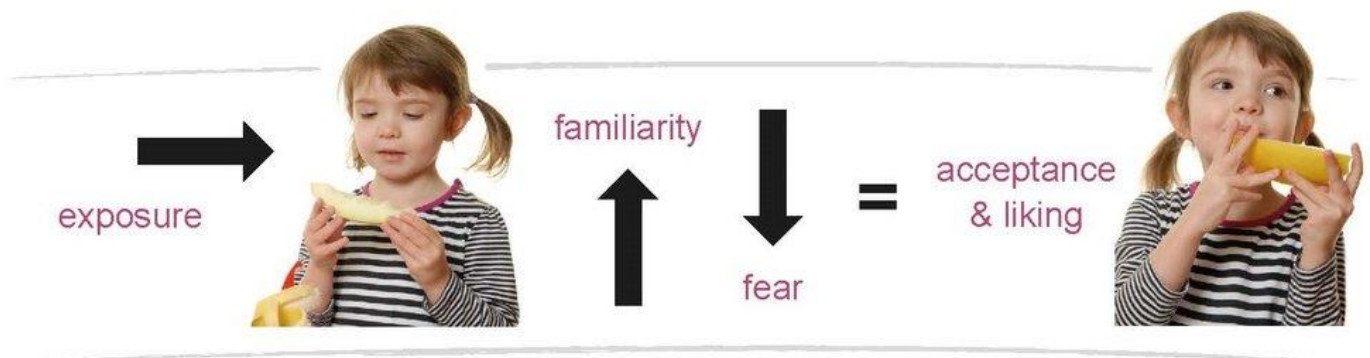
As with most evolutionary-rooted responses, their influence is difficult to ignore. Thus, while we don't have to scavenge for food today, and our children are served food that we know is safe, the tendency to be wary of new foods still persists.

Staff will always ensure the following:

- to help children to overcome their natural uncertainty and to encourage them to taste and eat new foods.
- By understanding that new foods, and previously liked foods, may be refused at a predictable stage in children's development, on the basis of their colour, smell, or taste and texture associations, we can begin to see the mealtime from the child's point of view. As a result, we can see clearer ways of how to tackle the behaviour.
- Staff will ensure if a child has a sensory avoidance with food with a particular texture that they will plan activities to help with the child's need.
- Staff will inform parents if a child has not eaten and will always offer the child snacks throughout the day.
- Liking can be encouraged and this food refusal overcome with a bit of persistence.
- Parents and staff need to keep exposing their children to the foods that are being rejected in order to increase the familiarity of the different sensory properties and foster acceptance.
- If food refusal is ignored, children may grow up refusing the same foods for the rest of their lives, leading to a diet that is unnecessarily restricted and lacking in vitamins and minerals.

What can parents do to encourage eating

- Children often refuse food because they have a fear of a food based on its unfamiliar or unusual sensory properties, such as appearance, texture, or smell.
- Understanding this can help you to approach food refusal from a fresh point of view. Rather than considering a child to be a 'picky eater', they are merely expressing an innate trait that we humans all share.
- Any phobia is treated by gradually increasing an individual's exposure to the thing that they fear. The same technique can be applied when encouraging children to accept new foods or re-accept previously liked foods. Repeatedly offering a food has been shown to lead to increased willingness to taste the food and increased liking for the food.
- Even bitter tastes, which are disliked from birth, can become liked simply through repeatedly offering them. Therefore, parents are encouraged to keep offering foods, even if they are refused and without any pressure to eat.
- It may help to think of exposure as a two-pronged tool, fostering acceptance and liking by reducing fear through increasing familiarity.



Things to try staff and parents

1. **Take your time**

It can take between 15-20 exposures (or offerings) before a child is willing to put a new food in their mouth. Try not to rush this process. Keep offering the food and don't give up before you have offered the food at least 20 times.

2. **Offer foods in different forms**

Think about the way in which you are offering a food. Foods can be prepared and offered in different ways and a child may dislike a food offered in one form, but like it if offered in another way. For example, carrots can be offered cooked with a meal, or raw as a snack, either cut into sticks or grated.

3. **Relax the pressure**

Don't pressure your child to taste a food if they are not ready to. Coercion can lead to other problems to be objective and acknowledge when your child has made progress. For example, praise your child when they happily eat a vegetable that they previously refused, even if they eat only a small amount. Be careful not to start pressuring them to finish the entire portion.

4. **Think outside the plate**

Exposure can take many forms and is not restricted to simply offering the foods in a situation where eating is the goal, for example at a meal or as a snack. Any contact that a child has with a food that is being refused will help to increase their familiarity with it and ultimately increase their willingness to try it. Activities that are based around learning about and growing foods, cooking, messy play, reading or singing songs about foods are all great ways to help introduce a food into a child's world.

Parents are often worried when their child eats very little, does not eat healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, or refuses a meal completely. For some, this worry can be significant, particularly if the child is not gaining weight well, or is losing weight. For others, uneaten meals can be a source of frustration.

Often parents/ staff find themselves using pressure, force or coercion to try and get their child to finish their meal.

Staff will aim to not to the following:

- **Pressure** - "I want you to eat all of your carrots"
- **Coaxing** - "Just eat that little, tiny piece there"
- **Emotional blackmail** - "A good girl would eat their dinner after Mummy worked so hard cooking it"
- **Use of rules** - "Eat your age; three potatoes because you are three years old"
- **Bribery** - "If you eat everything on your plate then you can leave the table"
- **Punishments** - "You can't go and play outside unless you finish your spaghetti"
- **Force-feeding** - physically putting food into the child's mouth and forcing them to swallow
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Using all of these behaviours has the opposite effect to what was intended.

While a child may eat a little more when being coerced, the act of being pressured into eating can lead to the development of negative associations with the food, and ultimately dislike and avoidance. It can also stop children from recognising and responding appropriately to internal signals of hunger and fullness, which can make them more likely to overeat in later life.

Why is it bad to pressure or strongly encourage a child to eat?

Parents' use of pressure to eat often stems from worry and anxiety regarding how or what a child is eating. Parents can become concerned about their child's health and wellbeing (and ultimate survival) if you feel that their child is not eating enough to sustain healthy development. If a child is underweight, parents are more likely to want to encourage eating and may end up using pressure without realising that they may have the opposite effect to that desired.

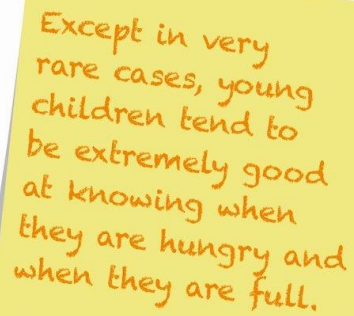
Parental pressure to eat can also stem from a desire to avoid wasting food that has been prepared, and the belief that children should 'clean their plates'.

However, sometimes the portion sizes that we serve to children are unrealistically large, meaning that it is unrealistic to expect the child to finish the meal and every meal will appear 'unfinished'. In this case, it is not the child eating too little, but the portion size being too large.

Pressure to eat has been linked with a number of negative consequences. These are:

- **Less liking for the food**
This can be caused by the negative experience of being forced to eat. Children are quick to make associations between foods and unpleasant experiences that accompany them. If a child is pressured to eat more than they wish to, then the negative emotional and/or internal feelings of being too full can become associated with a particular food, leading to a reduction in liking for the food.
- **Less willingness to eat the food**
Similarly, willingness to try a particular food can be reduced if the initial experiences are negative. For example, a child's first exposure to cabbage may be met with refusal, either due to their natural neophobia.
- If this refusal was met with constant verbal coaxing and a parent attempting to put the cabbage in their mouth, the association that the child would likely make with cabbage will not be a positive one.
- **Overeating and overweight**
Pressuring a child to eat can undermine their ability to learn appropriate appetite control.

- Children need to be given the opportunity to learn to recognise their body's hunger and fullness signals. Through experiencing feelings of hunger and a reduction in these feelings when they eat, children learn how their body signals that it requires more energy and, conversely, when enough energy has been consumed and it is appropriate to stop eating.



Except in very rare cases, young children tend to be extremely good at knowing when they are hungry and when they are full.

Although hunger and fullness are internal feelings, research has shown that they can be overridden by a number of factors. Pressure to eat is one way by which children might be urged to eat more than their body requires.

Over time, feelings of fullness lose their significance, as they no longer signal that the meal should stop. Rather, children learn to continue eating, even after they start to feel full, stopping only when their plate is empty, or when their parent says that it is okay to stop.

This means that children listen less to their body and so food intake becomes dictated by factors other than what the body requires. Research has also shown that children eat on average 30% more when offered a larger portion of food.

Offering children portion sizes that are too large and pressuring children to eat more than they desire are important factors in the development of overeating and overweight.

Except in very rare cases, children are extremely good at knowing when they are hungry and when they are full. Therefore, it is important to trust them and believe that they will eat if they are hungry. By doing this, you should not feel a need to pressure your child to eat. This is something that they will do willingly if their body requires food. Similarly, children's natural tendencies to reject new or bitter foods should not be met with pressure. Rather, keep offering foods and accept refusal, acknowledging that this is a normal developmental phase and that what you do is important in determining whether this is a positive or negative experience for your child.

Things to try to create positive eating

1. Examine the evidence

How long is it since your child last had a snack or filling drink, such as milk? Are they really hungry? Are they too tired to sit at the table and eat well? Is your child unwell and therefore not hungry? Try using a diary to track the number and timings of snacks, drinks, meals, and naps to see if your child's routine could be contributing to their eating behaviour.

2. Put yourself in their shoes

Try to imagine what it would be like if you were not hungry and you were being coaxed to eat, or even force-fed, or if you were unsure of what it was you were being asked to eat. How would you feel? Empathising with your child and seeing your behaviour through their eyes will help you to recognise that this behaviour is likely to have the opposite effect than you intended. Each time your child refuses food, remember to see things from their point of view.

3. Step back and be objective

Eating should be a pleasurable experience for your child that meets a biological need. It is not about satisfying *you*. Try to get satisfaction from knowing that your child has eaten as much as they desire and that *they feel satisfied*, rather than from having them eat an amount of food that you have defined.

4. Trust their tummies

Our bodies are very good at letting us know when we are hungry and full. However, constant interfering - by asking children to eat when they no longer want to - can disrupt this. Eating when hungry and stopping when full is a behaviour that we want to safeguard, not undermine, so try to allow your child to tell you when they are hungry and full.

5. **Check portion sizes.** Children's tummies are smaller than adults' and you may be serving too much food and therefore setting unrealistic expectations. As a guide, a single portion of each food is roughly what would fit in the palm of the child's hand. For example, if serving lasagne, give a palm-sized portion of the lasagne and 2-3 palm-sized portions of vegetables. For dessert, try a palm-sized portion of fruit, with a palm-sized serving of natural yogurt. Remember that all children's appetites differ, but sticking to the '*palm rule*' for each food will help you avoid giving over-sized portions of single foods.



As an example, for a two year old, a palm-sized portion of strawberries would equate to three large strawberries.

