

## General Mealtime Strategies

*This is a general guide, to support your child progressing to oral feeding. Make sure you discuss this with your health professional, who knows your child well. Your health professional will help you to create a plan for your child.*

*Please feel free to print this document and take it with you to your appointment.*

### Feeding goals for your child

- Try to set small achievable goals for eating. These may be the same as the goals in the Readiness Tool (Evaluation of readiness for transition from tube feeding to oral feeding). Set simple goals. For example sitting at the table with your family or tasting one new food per week.

### Meal schedule

- Try to have regular mealtimes; 3 meals and 2-3 snack times, around 2 hours apart (or 2 hours from the last tube feed)
- Try to have structure at mealtimes. For example sitting at a table, using a similar bib /placemat each time and avoiding distractions.
- Have your child seated for tube feeds (e.g. not while playing with toys). Tube feeds can take place during family mealtimes as well.
- Try not to allow your child to snack through the day. Allow only water between meals. Other meals might affect your child's hunger.
- Help your child think about the meal and hunger together. For example, "it's been a while since breakfast, is your tummy hungry?"
- Try to do a relaxation activity prior to the mealtime. For example washing hands with lots of bubbles or having a regular song/music to begin the meal with.
- Try to keep the eating area positive. For example, if your child resists medication, do not give it in the same room where you have meals

### Meal length

- A general eating period is 20 – 30 min for main meals, and 10-20 min for snacks (e.g. morning tea or afternoon tea)
- If your child does not sit down for this long, start with short periods. For example, 5 minutes (use a timer), then 10 minutes. This should help your child learn that meals end at set times, and on a positive note, not because of refusal.

### Positive interactions during meals

- Provide consistent instructions at each meal. For example what your child is expected to eat, staying in their seat.
- Provide opportunities for your child to make choices. For example the type of cup, utensils or foods. Choices between options are best. For example "You can choose strawberry or vanilla yoghurt", not "What kind of foods would you like today?"
- Involve your child in mealtime preparation. For example cutting foods into shapes, setting the table, and choosing foods at the supermarket.
- Provide positive attention (praise) for appropriate mealtime behaviours. For example touch, smiling, and encouraging. Provide praise as soon as you notice these behaviours, and for any approach to food.

- For some children, it is helpful to give a short break to do a preferred activity as well as praise. For example blowing bubbles.
- Try to limit the attention you give your child when he/she shows challenging behaviours (spitting food or complaining). Limiting attention could be looking away, not mentioning the behaviour, staying calm, and keep what you say focused on the expectation. For example our meal goes for another 5 minutes.
- Try to eat similar foods at meals to model a positive example and talk positively about food. For example "My yoghurt is sweet, what does yours taste like?"). Have siblings do the same where possible.
- Depending on your child's understanding, incentive charts or reward systems can also be helpful. You and your child can decide on a reward, and what they need to do to earn it.

#### Introducing new foods

- It is best to start with foods that your child is familiar with. For example, they have accepted or approached it before.
- Introduce new foods in small steps. For example, tiny pieces, or a pea-size amount on a spoon, or at a familiar texture.
- You can introduce new foods in regular family meals but place them on a separate plate. For example, a "learning plate" or offer them before the rest of the foods.
- You can give new foods outside of regular mealtimes. For example if intake during meals is of concern. These might be short "practice sessions". For example, you can ask your child to try a few bites of a new food. As your child progresses, the food can then be introduced to regular meals.