Food Without Fuss – Managing Fussy Eating

By Leah Henzen, Psychologist, Lakeside Psychology

Helping young people develop a healthy relationship with food is something I am really passionate about. I believe that eating is one of life’s simple pleasures that everybody, young and old, should be able to enjoy. I am so excited to now be presenting a group program based on proven strategies to help children overcome fussy eating, trouble with eating too little or too much, and helping parents manage mealtime frustrations. These workshops aim to help children become joyful eaters who eat a wide range of food and in the right amount for them. Here’s a snippet of what I will be talking about in our group program Food Without Fuss.

Intuitive eating

At the core of helping children to freely eat a wide range of foods in the right amounts for them is to have confidence in their ability to know when they are hungry and to eat enough to make them full. This is called intuitive eating. We are all born with the ability to know when we are hungry and seek out food to satisfy us. However many children’s ability to eat intuitively gets disrupted early on and in parents’ effort to get their children back to eating well we tend to set rules such as “just have two more bites” and “you can’t have dessert until your dinner is finished”. This usually backfires and ultimately causes more difficulty. Thankfully this natural ability to eat intuitively can easily be re-established if parents can maintain what we call The Division of Responsibility.

The Division of Responsibility

The division of responsibility helps parents separate their jobs and their children’s jobs with eating. The division of responsibility states that it is the parent’s responsibility to decide WHAT, WHERE and WHEN food is offered and it is the child’s responsibility to decide IF and HOW MUCH they eat of what is offered. A parent who maintains the division of responsibility does not get caught up in food battles. They simply present a range of foods at each meal or snack time (including at least one food they know their child will eat if hungry e.g. bread) and allow their child to decide if and how much they eat. Without the pressure to eat certain types and amounts of foods children will naturally eat a range of foods in the right amounts to satisfy them and give them good health – they will eat intuitively. The division of responsibility is easier to keep if there is structure with meals and snacks.
Structure is essential
If children graze throughout the day or eat whenever they say they are hungry they don’t learn to identify their hunger and fullness levels and also miss the opportunity to learn the difference between hunger and other feelings such as boredom or anxiety. Children get the best chance to eat intuitively if they are presented with food and drinks every few hours (water is the exception and can be given at any time). Offering three meals and a couple of snacks each day means these can be spaced every 2-3 hours throughout the day; giving enough time for children to develop an appetite in the lead up to each meal or snack without feeling famished.

Family meals
One of the most important aspects of the family meal is the opportunity for children to observe how adults eat. Adults model appropriate table manners as well as the ability to enjoy a wide variety of foods including fruit and vegetables. After a few weeks even the fussiest child who observes the adults in their lives enjoying a range of foods, while not being pressured to do so herself, will naturally begin to eat these same foods due to her inbuilt drive to grow up and be like her parents.

Happy feeding!

Seek professional help
To find out more about managing childhood feeding difficulties eating and the Food Without Fuss group program ask our reception staff or visit our website. You may also wish to purchase Ellyn Satter’s book Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family.