What to say when your eleven-year-old won't eat dinner

"My eleven-year-old says she's not hungry and leaves the table. An hour later she's in the kitchen eating crisps. What do I say at dinner?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You'll sit there until your plate is clean. Do you know how lucky you are to have this?"

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Okay, you don't have to finish it. Sit with us for a bit anyway, and your plate goes in the fridge if you're hungry later."

At eleven, "I'm not hungry" at dinner and crisps an hour later can feel like a game of chess. The instinct is to insist on the plate. The research on forced eating suggests that what a child remembers is the fight.

What is known, and at what age

In a survey of 407 college students, over two-thirds said they had been forced to eat something at least once. Among 140 who described their most memorable episode, three in four involved an authority figure, such as a parent or teacher, making a child eat a food they disliked. They remembered the conflict and the feeling of having no control, and 72% said they still would not eat that food. It is people's memories, not a trial.

A study of 2,231 adolescents, about fourteen on average, and their parents found that pressure to eat was common among parents of teenagers, more often from fathers and more often aimed at boys. It is a study of how common the practice is, not of what it does to a family dinner.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says that pressuring children to eat, or punishing them if they don't, can make them dislike foods, and that the parent's job is to provide the food and the child's is to decide whether to eat it.

What the words do

Take 1 makes the plate a test of gratitude she can only fail. Take 2 lets her off the food but not off the family: she sits with you for a while, and the plate is saved. Keep snacks to set times so she comes to dinner hungry.

If refusing food comes with skipped meals, weight loss, worry about her body or eating in secret, that is no longer a dinner-table question. Talk to your pediatrician or GP.

If you live in two homes

Food can differ a lot between two homes, and a child may eat happily at one table and refuse at the other. That is not a verdict on your cooking or on you. Keep the same calm words at your table, and if you share anything with the other parent, share one line directly, adult to adult: no pressure to finish, and one meal for everyone.

In the UK

If you are worried about her eating, her weight or how she talks about her body, your GP is the place to start, and you can ask for help even if you are not sure. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.