

SUPPORTING FUSSY EATERS AT MEALTIMES



DESCRIPTION

Many children, especially those on the autistic spectrum, have difficulty with eating. They may find the environment distracting or confusing, may be struggling to develop the skills required to be able to eat, have difficulty tolerating types of foods or have a restricted diet.

The following information considers each of these areas in more detail and then offers suggestions and ideas to develop these skills.

HELPFUL HINTS

Make Food Fun

Playing games with food can encourage children to develop their confidence. Play away from the dining table, to reduce anxieties.

- Use a straw to play 'blow football' with peas.
- Bobbing in water with foods encourages your child to experience the food without eating it
- Feely bags - can they tell what food is in the bag without looking??
- Cook or bake with your child

PRACTICING FOR MEALTIMES:

- Try to make sure that mealtimes are an enjoyable time for your child. Aim to make it a positive experience, avoiding confrontation and giving lots of praise. Modelling good practice supports learning.
- Don't give up!!! Continue to serve foods even if they are rejected so your child becomes more familiar with them. You may have to serve a food a dozen times before your child will actually try it.

- If you can try and change our child's favourite food ever so slightly, e.g. break their biscuit into 2 or mix in a different flavour of yoghurt in to the one they are used to and see if they tolerate the change. Some children can be trained this way to accept a wider variety or tastes and textures.
- Avoid having low-nutrition foods available. This is especially important if your child continually rejects healthier foods. Keep nutritious snacks such as grapes and vegetable sticks and dip and dried fruit available at home.
- Offer healthy choices to let the younger child feel some control 'sweet corn or peas?'
- Serve small portions that aren't over whelming. If your child has trouble biting or chewing cut the food into smaller pieces.
- Do not withhold meals. Hunger doesn't work as an incentive, when they are hungry they become cranky and less likely to cooperate.

THE ENVIRONMENT:

- Try to have family members eat together at a regular time each day. Avoid food battles at the family meal, focusing instead on sharing the pleasure of one another's company.
- Try and keep the setting consistent so that the child is used to it and is comfortable.
- Try a family picnic in the living room on occasion, to reduce the formality.
- Think about the amount of people eating. Extra people can create more noise and visual distraction.

ORAL MOTOR DEVELOPMENT:

Some children may struggle with developing oral motor skills - this is the movement of the muscles in the mouth, lips, tongue, cheeks and jaw and includes biting, crunching, chewing, sucking and licking.

It may be a good idea to do the following activities in front of the mirror so that the child can see the movements they are making with their mouths.

- Use Stretchy tubing/chewy tube (www.fledglings.com) to practise chewing.
- Counting teeth with tongue, moving the tongue all around the mouth.
- Play a game where you take it in turns to give each other an instruction to do with the mouth e.g. Stick your tongue out, Make your tongue jump from one cheek to the other.
- Blowing balloons, whistles or horns.
- Vibrating toothbrush - dunk this in something they enjoy eating but try not to use fizzy drinks or sweets.
- Have a mouth box which contains lots of games, equipment which your child can use to practise their oral motor skills. Try and build it into your child's routine so that they spend a 10 minutes at least 3 times a week practising their oral motor skills.
- Make sure your child has had regular visits to the dentists to check for sensitivity, gum disease and cavities

SENSORY:

The sensory environment plays a major role at mealtime. It includes the room in which we feed a child, the reactions of others who share the room, and the sensations of taste, texture, and temperature of the feeding utensils and food.

Children with sensory difficulties can take comfort in the predictability of food they know and like; you'll need patience and understanding to introduce new foods.

The following ideas or tips include preparation activities and suggestions to try at mealtimes.

- Before mealtimes try to introduce games which include rocking motions (slow repetitive motion), firm pressure (e.g. hugs) and heavy work (e.g. moving furniture). This can help to calm the sensory system in preparation.
- Ask them to chew on ice before and during a meal if you are trying a different flavour or texture, this again will reduce the sensitivity in their mouth making it less likely for them to respond in a 'flight or fight' manner.

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- Allow them to drink liquids of differing temperature and also some drinks that are fizzy.
- Are there distractions such as sounds, smells, sights? You may want to try playing background music and soft lighting. How about using a tablecloth and plastic dishes that don't clatter on the table.
- Brush teeth using an electric tooth brush and encourage your child to brush their tongue and the insides of his cheeks to try to reduce the sensitivity in his mouth. This will help with mealtimes.
- Provide containers at the table with herbs and spices. Salt, pepper, cinnamon, oregano, or ketchup can add to the taste of foods. Many children dislike food or are indifferent to meals because of poor taste abilities. The presence of these condiments offers choices for communication that are meaningful.
- Using a mouth toy may help to reduce the oral sensitivity. School-age children chew erasers, crunch hard candy, and hold pencils between their teeth.
- If your child avoids mixing textures, serve their portion separated out, rice on one-plate beans on another. You can also gradually add texture; a very light coat of tomato sauce on their pasta may be all they can tolerate, but over time as the foods become more familiar, they may be more accepting of sauce and eventually tolerate the type with tomato chunks in and bits of meat in.

BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES:

- Don't prioritise food e.g. "You have to eat your dinner before you can have any pudding"
- Never hide food in other foods. You need to create a trusting relationship between you and your child regarding food
- Use tokens and rewards but don't use food as a reward
- Use creative presentation skills to coax younger children. Instead of serving meatballs and broccoli serve 'Rocks and Trees'. Use cookie cutters to cut foods into fun shapes, or arrange foods on a plate to create an animal and faces.

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- Make sure your child has a way to say no!
- Write rules for mealtimes on the placemat
- Make sure your child has at least one thing they really enjoy on their plate
- Role model good eating habits
- Do not discuss your child's eating habits during mealtimes
- When introducing something new try dipping it in a food they really like such as tomato ketchup, juice etc. It may be that the first time they just lick off what you have dipped it in but the fact that they have experienced the food in or around their mouth is usually progress.
- Try using a 'baby safe feeder' these can be purchased from ASDA and Boots and probably most supermarkets. The food is placed in the feeder inside a mesh pocket, it allows the child to suck, lick, chew and generally experience the food without having to actually eat it. This provides a much less scary way of experiencing new foods.

FOOD JAGS:

A food jag may be a particular habit or insistence on the same food, for example; some children will only eat crinkle cut carrots, or they will only eat their lunch out of the same container, in the same place, at the same time.

With such children it can be very difficult to introduce new foods.

- Try introducing frozen or cold food as this reduces the smell and your child can then see what the food looks like
- Remember when introducing new foods, it may take very small steps. If they can tolerate a new food being on their plate, pair it with something they really like, they may even try it!
- It may take a long time and very small steps for your child to tolerate a new food. You therefore need to persevere and be consistent in your methods.