

Difficulties at Mealtimes Skills



This pack provides hints and tips to help you facilitate independence in feeding with the children/young people you work with, with a focus on sensory difficulties.

Please use the advice and strategies contained in this pack before you make a referral to the Occupational Therapy Service. If you feel you require further information please click [here](#) where you can book onto one of our education sessions.

Feeding and mealtimes can often be a difficult time due to a variety of reasons. This can be related to environment, sensory problems, restrictions with movement and also positioning. By identifying the areas of difficulty and strategies to deal with these difficulties, mealtimes can often become a more enjoyable experience for both the child/young person and their peers/teachers.

Think about your perfect meal? For most people it involves a calm and relaxed environment, a nice atmosphere, with good company (friends and family). It will probably involve you eating your favourite foods and at a time when you have chosen. Although it's not always easy, we should aim to make mealtimes like this for the children/young people we work with.

Environmental Considerations

- As mentioned above, mealtimes should be in a calm and happy environment - try to avoid confrontation.

- Mealtimes should be social occasions so try not to separate children/young people from their peers and encourage them to interact with each other while sitting at the table.
- Children/young people learn from watching others so it's beneficial for them to sit with other children/young people who engage well in mealtimes. Also, if you're having your meal with the children/young people, try to remember to model good, positive behaviour.
- Think about background noise - this can be very off putting to children/young people who are sensitive to noise. For those who struggle to concentrate, try to limit background noise so that they can focus on what they are doing, such as mastering cutlery skills or trying a new food. You may want to consider playing some calming, relaxing music for some groups of children.
- Is it hectic and busy, think back to your favourite meal, was it in a busy environment or was it calm and relaxing? Children/young people also need to be in a calm environment to enjoy their mealtime.
- Do the dishes and utensils make a lot of noise? How about using a tablecloth and plastic dishes that don't clatter on the table. Try a class picnic outside or on the carpet on occasion, to reduce the formality.
- Try and keep the setting consistent so that the child/young person is used to it and is comfortable.

Eating and Drinking

This can be challenging for both the child/young person and the carer. The child/young person needs to be able to communicate their needs - think about what level of communication they are at and what they use to communicate. Do they use verbal language or do they use signs symbols or pictures? It may help to talk to the child/young person's Speech and Language Therapist about how the child/young person communicates. You should also speak to parents about how the child/young person communicates at home, particularly in relation to mealtimes, as they may have developed their own strategies. The child/young person also needs some level of physical ability to be able to feed themselves. There are small pieces of equipment which can help children/young people engage more with feeding. If you feel a child/young person needs additional support with feeding involving pieces of equipment, please refer the child/young person to the Occupational Therapy Service or click [here](#) for links to useful websites where you can buy such equipment. The child/young person also needs to be able to maintain a certain level of

concentration and some social awareness to be able to participate in feeding.

For the carer, a certain amount of patience may be required, as well as the time to support the child/young person in developing their feeding. The carer should also be aware of the way the child/young person communicates, as mentioned above.

Importance of Feeding Skills

Feeding is important for the development of social skills and social relationships. It also helps develop;

- Physical/fine motor skills
- Oral motor skills
- Hand-eye coordination
- Sensory processing skills

Developmental Stages of Feeding Skills

There are 8 stages of developing feeding skills;

1. Finger feeding, holds bites and chews a piece of food, may attempt to grasp cup, tries to grasp a spoon when being fed.
2. Holds and drinks from a cup, attempts to hold a spoon, brings to mouth and licks.
3. Holds and brings to mouth, may play with food. Will drink from cup but holds between two hands.
4. Asks for food and drink independently, feeds self with spoon but can be distracted easily.
5. Attempts to use fork.
6. Eats with fork and spoon.
7. Attempts to use knife.
8. Uses both knife and fork to eat.

These steps are expected with a child/young person of 'typical' development but they do not occur for all children/young people at the same time. These steps will help you highlight the stages that a child/young person needs to move through before becoming independent in eating. It may be that the child/young person is not at their age appropriate level - this is ok! By understanding what stage they are currently at, you should be able to work out what they need to do to move onto the next stage. For example, they may not be able to use a knife and fork together yet so you may need to take a step back and make sure they have achieved the stages before this

Physical Skills

Children/young people need a certain level of physical ability to be able to feed themselves as independently as possible. Here are some of the skills you may want to consider:

- Hand Skills - Can they grasp items and hold them for a sustained period of time? If not, you may want to practise some upper limb and hand strengthening activities, click [here](#) for hand strengthening activities. If you would like further information on developing hand skills, click [here](#) for the 'Developing Hand Skills' Resource Pack
- Are they able to sit independently or with support (special seating)? Do they need a different seat for eating? If the child has special seating, look on their seating programme for information about when they should use their seat. This will tell you if they should be using it for mealtimes. If the child does not use special seating you should make sure they are seated in an appropriate position at the table - their bottom should be at the back of the chair and their hips, knees and elbows should all be positioned at 90 degrees.
- Do they have good hand-eye coordination? If they are struggling with hand-eye coordination, try games which will help develop these skills, such as ball skills.

Oral Motor Development

Oral motor skills involve the movement of the muscles in the mouth. These muscles are needed to develop muscle strength and coordination in order to bite, chew, suck, lick and crunch different foods. If a child/young person has not developed these skills, they may avoid certain foods which they find difficult to manage in their mouths.

Activity Ideas

- Speak to parents and advise regular visits to the dentist to check for sensitivity and/or gum disease.
- Oral Motor Games
 1. Chewy tubes; these can help develop muscle strength in the mouth.
 2. Counting teeth with tongue.
 3. Moving tongue all around the mouth.
 4. Holding a straw in the mouth.

5. 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
 - Run your tongue across your teeth
 - Make your tongue jump from one cheek to the other
 - Make an 'O' shape with your mouth
 - Count your teeth with your tongue
6. Blowing foods with straws across the table - blow football with peas. Make food fun; try not to get angry if a mess is made as this will encourage a negative relationship with food.
7. Bobbing in water with foods, again to encourage the child/young person to have fun with foods, this way they don't have to eat the food but do get to experience different foods. You might want to do such games with food in a different place to where they eat their dinner so that they understand that it's acceptable to play with food in one place but not at the dinner table, during mealtimes.
8. Blowing balloons
9. Blowing whistles/horns
10. Vibrating toothbrush - dunk it in something they enjoy eating but try not to use fizzy drinks or sweets.
11. Feely bags - can they tell what food is in the bag without looking.
12. It may be a good idea to do these activities in front of the mirror so that the child can see the movements they are making with their mouths.
13. Have a mouth box which contains lots of games and equipment which the child/young person can use to practise their oral motor skills. Try and build it into their daily routine so that they spend 10 minutes, 3 times a week practising their oral motor skills.



Sensory Awareness

Imagine trying to eat a meal with someone shouting at you, bright lights flashing around you and loud music playing, all while you're sitting on a therapy ball. You would probably find it quite difficult!

Some children/young people have difficulties with eating as they struggle with processing sensory information. This could be in a number of different ways;

- Filtering out distractions.
- Dislike of certain tastes and textures in their mouth.
- Sensitivities to touching items or certain materials with their hands.
- Inability to sit for a sustained period.

Observe the child/young person during a mealtime to help you identify these areas; you should also talk to parents/carers as they may already have an idea of their child/young person's sensory difficulties related to feeding.

Strategies

If a child/young person has difficulty calming down in preparation to sit at the table for a mealtime or is sensitive to certain textures and tastes in their mouth/hands, you may want to try some calming activities before mealtimes;

- Deep pressure activities such as - wheelbarrow walks, walking forward with hands while lying over a therapy ball on their stomach, bear hugs, rolling the child/young person into a hot dog, body massage.
- Rocking backwards/forwards/side to side on a therapy ball is also calming to the sensory system.
- Heavy work activities - involve the child/young person in handing out and clearing away dinner plates if appropriate.
- Use calming music to set the tone.
- Whilst seated try sit fit cushions to provide movement without the child/young person having to get up from the table.
- Use lap weights while seated to provide deep pressure.
- Blowing games and chewy foods can also be calming.

If the child/young person seems to be sensitive to certain textures, tastes or materials (e.g. cutlery) in their mouth, as well as trying the strategies mentioned above you could also try some oral massage. This

involves using your hands or a vibrating toothbrush to massage around the outside of the child/young person's mouth, cheeks and jaw. **Do not put your fingers or any objects inside the child/young person's mouth** - this could hurt them and make them more anxious about putting foods into their mouth. If you have tried all the strategies within this pack without success, please refer to the Occupational Therapy Service.

Some children/young people may seem under responsive and need additional sensory input to alert them in order to enable them to engage in a mealtime;

- Alerting foods - crunchy, strong flavours such as fizzy or sour sweets.
- Quick changeable movements - e.g. on a therapy ball.
- Loud, sudden music.

Again, think about the environment;

- Ideally children/young people should be able to eat with their peers, however sometimes a busy dining room is too much for them to tolerate; consider allowing them to eat in a smaller, less busy room. You could allow 2/3 friends to eat with them.
- Use plastic plates on a table cloth to reduce noise.

Routines and Motivation

- Include dinner time and snack times on the child/young person's timetable so they know when to expect them.
- Allow appropriate snack times.
- Don't prioritise food.
- Don't hide food in other foods.
- Use rewards, but don't use food as a reward.
- Ignore negatives, give lots of praise.
- Don't force the child/young person to clear their plate.
- Incorporate character plates/place mats.
- Try and make sure the child/young person has one thing they really like on their plate.
- Make sure they have a way of saying no or that they have an appropriate choice.
- Write basic rules together and put them on place mats.
- Model good eating habits.
- Do not discuss the child/young person's eating habits during mealtimes.

Food Jags

A food jag may be a particular habit or insistence on the same food, for example; some children/young people will only eat crinkle cut carrots, or will only eat red food, or they will only eat their lunch out of the same container, in the same place, at the same time. With such children/young people it can be very difficult to introduce new foods. Below are some activities to try:

- When introducing new foods try keeping it frozen or cold as this reduces the smell, the child/young person can then see what it looks like. It may be for the first time that you just get it out of the freezer/fridge during a meal to see if your child/young person can tolerate it being there. 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!
- 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, Boots and Fledglings and some supermarkets. The food is placed in the feeder inside a mesh pocket, it allows the child/young person 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. For children/young people with ASD or who are very resistant eaters, trying new foods may fill them with dread.
- Try playing games with new foods or do some cooking with your child/young person. Even if they are not going to eat it, they are able to experience it and have fun with it which reduces the fear of that new food.
- Involve the child/young person in the cooking and choosing process.
- Separate foods on separate plates.
- Let them get messy with food-blowing peas with straws, apple/fruit bobbing. Make sure you have clear boundaries so they realise they can't behave like this at mealtimes.

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- It may take a long time and very small steps for the child/young person to tolerate a new food. You therefore need to persevere and be consistent in your methods.

Remember

- Meal time routine
- Sitting position
- The environment
- Sensory difficulties
- Small steps
- Prepare for them to make a mess

Resources or Reading you may find of interest

- Building Bridges through Sensory Integration; Therapy for Children with Autism and Other Pervasive Developmental Disorders by E Yack, P Aquilla and S Sutton.
- Just Take a Bite; Easy Effective Answers to Food Aversions and Eating Challenges by L Ernsperger and T Stegen-Hanson.
- Dietary management for children and adolescents with ASDs: restricted diet www.Autism.org.uk