



MANAGING EATING and MEALTIMES
for CHILDREN with
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be very selective in their eating - this is part of the condition.

Some children with ASD eat a narrow range of foods. However, these foods may provide a range of nutrients which means any nutritional deficiencies will be avoided. Other children with ASD may eat lots of different foods. However, these foods may all contain similar nutrients and the child's diet may be unbalanced.



Ask your dietitian for more help if you are concerned or have questions about your child's diet.



For more information about a balanced diet for your child - ask for copies of the leaflets 'WHAT IS A CHILD'S PORTION?' (there is a leaflet for each food group!).

Research has shown that some children with ASD seem to have 'cravings' for certain foods. They may choose to eat these foods in place of other foods and this may lead to concerns about nutrient intake and weight gain.



Ask your dietitian for more help and advice if feel your child has 'food cravings'.

To help your child to try new foods and begin to change their mealtime behaviour - you will need to use a range of skills and techniques that other parents may not.

... and MORE IDEAS ON HELPING YOUR CHILD TO EAT
- from other parents!

THINK ABOUT WAYS TO MANAGE YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR:



Distract your child while eating. Use music, television or your child's favourite video/DVD.



Children with ASD may find it difficult to focus on talking and eating together. Watching a favourite television programme or listening to music needs little concentration and it may be a good distraction for your child.



Reward your child for making even the smallest steps (eg: allowing food to stay on the plate while still eating their preferred foods).



Focus on one behaviour at a time (eg: when your child is trying a new food, ignore poor table manners).



If you have found something that helps manage your child's behaviour in other areas (eg: sleeping, play) - try using this at mealtimes as well (eg: reward or distraction).



Remember - all children are different and some of these ideas will work better than others. Think about your child and what is best for them.

SOME MORE IDEAS ON HELPING YOUR CHILD TO EAT

– from other parents!

MAKE MEALS FUN BY USING GAMES AND YOUR CHILD'S

SPECIAL INTERESTS:



Count mouthfuls.



Use favourite characters (eg: *Thomas the Tank Engine/Fimbles/Charlie and Lola plate or dish*).



Give foods new names (eg: *Tubby custard*).



Cut foods into shapes (eg: *turkey dinosaurs, pizza faces, star shaped sandwiches*).



Use stories about food and eating (eg: *'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'* by Eric Carle; *'Green Eggs and Ham'* by Dr Seuss and Adrian Edmondson; *'The Mouse and the Apple'* by Stephen Butler).



Use songs about food (eg: *'Pat-a-cake'*; *'One potato, two potato'*; *'Jack Sprat'*; *'Oranges and lemons'*).



There are many children's stories and songs involving food – the ones listed are examples only and no endorsement is being given by their inclusion.



For more ideas – ask for a copy of the leaflet 'Fun with Food – Learning Through Play'.

This leaflet gives tips and ideas on introducing new foods and managing family mealtimes.



There are ideas for a range of ages – those more suited to younger children are marked with a



Some of the tips may be helpful and some may not as every child is different.

BE PATIENT, BE PERSISTENT AND DO NOT GIVE UP!!

Tips to help

TO INTRODUCE NEW FOODS TO YOUR CHILD

New foods can be difficult for children with ASD to accept for both psychological and sensory reasons. A new food may have a different colour, shape, smell, texture or taste. This can be very daunting if your child dislikes change, particularly if they are highly sensitive to smell, taste or texture.

COMBINE FOODS YOUR CHILD WILL EAT WITH A NEW FOOD.



Try offering your child a smell, lick or a taste of a new food, then a mouthful of the food you know they will eat – continue to do this throughout the meal and at each meal time.



... .. more tips to help
TO INTRODUCE NEW FOODS TO YOUR CHILD

ASK YOUR CHILD TO SAY HOW THE FOOD FEELS.

For example - is the food sticky, crunchy, smooth or crumbly? This will help your child to sort foods by their texture or feel.



WHEN CHOOSING A NEW FOOD FOR YOUR CHILD TO TRY - THINK ABOUT THE FOODS YOUR CHILD ALREADY EATS.

It may be easier to try foods from the same 'family' of accepted foods (eg: if your child eats bread, try pitta bread, crumpet or scone).



If your child prefers a certain colour of food (eg: orange foods) then try to offer a new food that is the same colour.



If your child prefers a certain texture of food (eg: fruit jelly) then try to offer a new food that is similar in texture (eg: fruit mousse or instant dessert).



... .. and more tips to help
WITH YOUR CHILD'S EATING AND MEALTIMES

Do not assume a child will refuse a food they do not eat at home in a different situation (eg: nursery, relative/friend's house). Children will often accept different foods for different people or in different places.



Some children may respond to an incentive or reward for trying a food. It is important that your child knows what the reward is before tasting or eating the food - it should be something of interest to your child and the reward should be immediate so they make the connection.



The reward should not be food-based (eg: sweets, chocolate) as this may give your child the idea that some foods are 'better' than others.

Use food in play to let your child experience food in a non-threatening way (eg: pretend tea party using toys and pretend or real food, memory or lotto game using food pictures, fruit/vegetable print painted pictures etc).



Involve your child in shopping - give them their own shopping list using pictures of the foods needed.



... .. more tips to help

WITH YOUR CHILD'S EATING AND MEALTIMES

Make a clear end to your child's mealtime. Plan what you and your child are going to do at the end of the meal and tell your child before the meal starts - again, use pictures or show the play item (*eg: book/toy to help them understand*).



Some children eat better with others and some are best not watched. There is 'no right or wrong' - do whatever is best for your child. Remember to discuss with staff at your child's nursery or school.



Some children will try foods from their parent's plate rather than their own. Encourage this - it's not wrong! Give some of the food on their own plate as well - your child may then try this too.



Some children dislike strong food smells - try to gradually introduce strong smelling foods, including cooking smells. But - be aware at mealtimes and let your child sit away from someone who is eating a strong smelling food.



Talk to your child about the sensory aspects of food (*eg: differences in colour, temperature, smell, touch*). Do this at home, when out with friends and when shopping for food at the supermarket.



... .. and a few more tips to help TO INTRODUCE NEW FOODS TO YOUR CHILD

INVOLVE YOUR CHILD:

Use a paper plate and arrange pictures (cut out of magazines) of the foods you are going to give your child as they will appear on the plate. You can also use Play-doh to model foods or plastic food models.



Make a 'My Food' book with pictures of foods your child eats and the new food to be tried. A drawing, picture from a magazine or food label can all be used.



Make a visual 'timetable' for your child to help plan the new food to be tasted. The website www.dotolearn.com has some useful pictures and ideas to help you do this.



Show your child a picture of the new food before giving them the 'real' food to try. If appropriate, offer your child a choice of new foods (*eg: for bread - pitta bread or crumpet; for vegetables - carrot or parsnip*).



... and more tips to help
TO INTRODUCE NEW FOODS TO YOUR CHILD

WHEN OFFERING A NEW FOOD TO YOUR CHILD:

Take small steps (eg: touching the food, then smelling before licking and tasting).



Ask for a copy of the leaflet 'Step-by-Step Guide to Food Acceptance' to help you with the different stages.

TRY LEAVING SMALL AMOUNTS OF NEW FOODS ON PLATES OR BOWLS AROUND THE HOUSE.

For example - pieces of fruit, fingers of bread, carrot sticks, strips of green pepper - your child can then choose to smell, touch, lick or eat these when they are ready.



REMEMBER FOOD HYGIENE - REMOVE UNEATEN FOOD AND WATCH ANY PETS!!



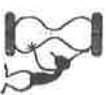
Do not put pressure on your child to eat - this may lead to further restriction in the foods they will accept.

Tips to help

WITH YOUR CHILD'S EATING AND MEALTIMES

WHEN MAKING CHANGES TO YOUR CHILD'S MEALTIMES - ONLY CHANGE ONE THING AT A TIME!

Make a 'no sitting - no food' rule. This will give your child structure and routine at mealtimes. But remember - set realistic goals for sitting, eg: 5 minutes. Try using a timer and give plenty of praise!



Try using a child-size chair and table - this will help to create a focus and a routine to your child's meals.



At family meals, try to serve foods in dishes in the middle of the table allowing each family member to help themselves. Many children accept food more readily when they are able to take the food on their terms.



Make a clear beginning to your child's meal (eg: washing hands, taking cutlery to the table).



Tell your child a few minutes before the mealtime that their meal is nearly ready.

Children with ASD may understand visual prompts better so try using symbols or pictures.



Involve your child in making a visual 'timetable' to help them understand the routine.



(Remember - the website www.dotolearn.com has some useful pictures and ideas to help you do this.)