

Eating and Children with SEND

Not all children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) will have an issue with food, but if your child does it helps to understand why it might be happening and what you can do to help.

Possible reasons your child will not eat

Neurodivergent children often experience senses such as the taste, smell, sight and touch in a different way to other children. This means that neurodivergent children can have strong reactions to different foods; they may also react strongly to food and mealtimes for a variety of other reasons (ie the environment). This can apply if your child has autism, sensory processing disorder, executive function disorder or dyspraxia.

Problems with eating are also common for children with global developmental delay. This is when a child does not reach developmental milestones at expected times. They may take longer to learn behaviours around mealtimes when compared to other children of the same age.

Some common patterns that children may display are that they:

- May not recognise when they are hungry
- Only want to eat with a certain spoon, fork or plate – or drink from a certain cup
- Become overwhelmed and upset by smells or noises around them
- Find it difficult to sit for any significant length of time to eat
- Struggle to eat foods with certain textures
- Find some flavours too strong or too weak
- Dislike having different textures or colours on a plate at once, or combining textures (like gravy and sausages)
- Gravitate towards pale or beige foods i.e. pasta, bread, crisps
- May prefer food with manageable textures, i.e. jars of baby food, yoghurts
- Avoid whole food categories, typically meat, fruit and/or vegetables
- Refuse some food after a bad experience, like choking or being sick
- Struggle to grip cutlery or open packets due to coordination issues
- Get upset at changes in routine or how you serve food

How can you help?

Look for patterns

Every child reacts in their own way to feelings of unhappiness or when overwhelmed. Notice how your child behaves when food is around. They may cry, throw something, or become quiet. Sometimes you'll need to wait before you try to get them to eat something.

Learning to spot the warning signs over time will help you think about how to take the pressure off.

Help your child feel relaxed

It can help to adapt your mealtimes or what you offer your child to allow them to feel relaxed. You could:

- Start by putting a small amount of food on their plate and adding more if that goes well.
- Look at their environment – what makes them stressed and what relaxes them?
- Put a different food nearby and let them see you eat and enjoy it, without forcing them to have it
- Make sure food isn't touching other food on the plate or use a separate plate for new foods (if this is an issue for your child)
- Be aware of textures. If your child only eats foods based on texture, rather than taste, try to offer more food choices of their preferred texture to broaden the range of food they eat. For example, if your child only eats baby food jars, try pureeing some of your own foods.
- Allow your child to sit somewhere other than the table or in another room, if this is what they'd like
- Let them pick up food with their fingers if they want to – then introduce a fork bit by bit
- Do activities with your child where they touch the food but don't eat it i.e. messy food play – this can help them get used to having it on their hands
- Try offering choices so your child feels some control over what they put in their mouth, i.e. have three different vegetables on the table and they can choose which one will go on their plate
- Introduce any changes to their routine bit by bit rather than sudden changes

Be patient

It may feel impossible to introduce new foods and you might worry about the impact your child's behaviour is having on their health. Try to be patient and remember that it may take time for their behaviour to change.

Be aware of timings and what state your child is in when you're asking them to eat. It's Okay to change your routine, or where you eat, if it helps your child to try more food, even if this is different to what other families are doing. Do not worry if something doesn't go well, you can try again the next day.

If you can, avoid putting pressure on them. They may pick up on any anxious feelings you have and will be less likely to eat.

Get support

If you're worried about your child, speak to your GP. You may be able to ask for a referral to a dietician, who should be able to assess and treat dietary issues.

Further advice and support is also available from the [Occupational Therapy Service](#)

[Occupational Therapy Service – Eating and drinking skills](#)