



EATING WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITIES OR CO-ORDINATION DIFFICULTIES

Children can experience various eating-related difficulties as they develop, especially when there are sensory sensitivities and difficulties with co-ordination. This can make mealtimes both stressful and worrying for parents. Below we have given examples of some typical issues and offered a few ideas and strategies to try.

Will not accept foods touching or mixed on a plate

They prefer separate textures which are easier to chew and swallow. Ask yourself, does it really matter while they learn to combine textures? Offer their food on a divided plate so that different foods can be in separate segments of the plate.

Limited diet

Keep exposing your child to different foods even if they will only touch it or smell it at first. Put the new food on an additional plate so it doesn't put them off the foods they will happily eat. Avoid introducing new foods at big family dinners or social occasions. Encourage food preparation, or use favoured characters or people to encourage them to try the foods; this gives them more trust and control. Introduce new foods slowly and praise any attempts to eat without forcing the child to eat new foods. Offer similar foods to the ones they will already accept, maybe prepared in a slightly different way.

Over-stuffing or pouching foods

Children may do this to stretch the receptors and give more sensory feedback, which might otherwise be too subtle to detect. It may be a naturally adopted strategy to help breakdown the food. Change may be a slow process, but you could try visual supports or prompting to encourage one bite, chew, swallow, next bite.

Actively eats and eats – compulsive chewing

This provides lots of sensory input during the day. Try using other items for chewing such as Chewy Tubes or Chewelry. A sports bottle for drinking requires strong sucking and will provide similar sensory input. Use a visual timetable to show times for eating.

Difficulty with using cutlery

Strong motivation is needed as fingers can be quicker and easier. If co-ordination is a problem, using larger handled or heavier cutlery can be easier. The weight gives more 'pull' to enhance movement sensors. Assist hand-over-hand to help reinforce the correct movement. Use a shaped plate to stop food falling off and a silicone mat to stop the plate moving.

Can't sit up straight to eat at table

Make sure their feet can rest firmly on the floor or a step. This will help to ground them and enable them to balance their upper body more efficiently.

Difficulty accepting a change of packaging or look of a food product

Better to be honest and warn them in advance that it is different to retain trust. Use visual supports or a Social Story to explain the change.



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Difficulty staying at the table and table manners

Try to build up time at the table from a very short time, which is rewarded. Rethink reasonable times and rules and gradually work towards the desired behaviour. Have clear social rules about eating out and eating at home. A Social Story or visual prompt can help a child to understand what is expected at the table, and practising through play can also reinforce this.

Refusing all foods at mealtimes

Try limiting snacks between meals and keep mealtimes regular. Use a visual timetable to show what will happen after mealtimes and reward the child with a favoured activity after mealtime. Consider how much fluid your child is drinking as this can affect their appetite. Use small steps to help your child reach a particular goal and find a motivator that is meaningful so you can reward each step. Try smelling, touching, licking as a gradual process building up to tasting.

Anxiety around mealtimes anticipating an activity they find uncomfortable

Try to relax the pressure as this can lead to negative associations with food and mealtimes. Keep your own worry and desperation in check and make your responses to progress and failure as calm and low key as possible.

SNAP Library

There are several books in our library that may help with different aspects of your child's eating. These may be relating to autism, co-ordination difficulties, sensory issues or restricted diets. You can contact one of our advisers for suggestions, or have a look at one of the popular books below.

Strategies for a Successful Mealtime – Maureen Flanagan

Can't Eat, Won't Eat: Dietary Difficulties and the Autism Spectrum – Brenda Legge

Just Take a Bite – Lori Ernsperger

Food Refusal and Avoidant Eating in Children including those with autism spectrum conditions – Gillian Harris and Elizabeth Shea

What to Feed an Asperger – Sarah Patten

Helping Your Child with Extreme Picky Eating – Katya Rowell

The tips and ideas given via this SNAP information sheet have been gathered during our every day work with families and also from workshops and talks at SNAP delivered by occupational therapists and other professionals. This is not a substitute for medical advice. If you are concerned about your child's eating behaviour or nutritional intake contact your GP or other health professional.

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