



Eating With Sensory Sensitivities or Coordination Difficulties

Children can experience various eating-related difficulties as they develop, especially when there are **sensory sensitivities** and **coordination difficulties**. 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 are learning?

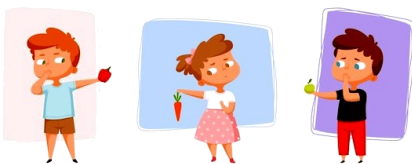


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Offer their food on a divided plate so that different foods can be in separate segments of the plate.

Restricted diet

Keep exposing your child to different foods even if they will only touch it or smell it at first. Include at least one safe food on their plate, and you can serve an unfamiliar food to expose them to something outside of their comfort zone on an additional plate. 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. Introduce new foods slowly and praise any attempts to eat them independently. Offer similar foods to the ones they will already accept, maybe prepared in a slightly different way.



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Over-stuffing or pouching

Children may do this to stretch the receptors and to give more sensory feedback which might otherwise be too subtle to detect. It may also be a naturally adopted strategy to help break down the food, as the fine movements required to put food into your mouth, keep it there for chewing and move it back once it's ready to be swallowed can be challenging for children. You could try visual supports or prompting to encourage one bite, chew, swallow, next bite.



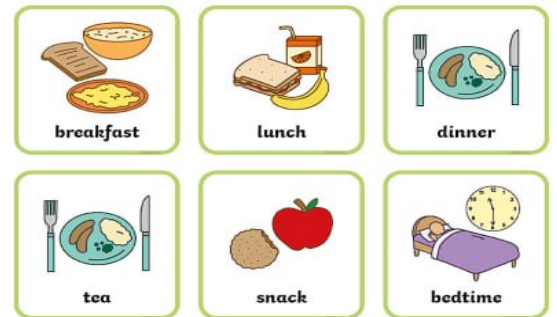
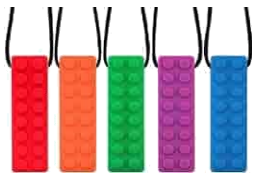
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Compulsive chewing

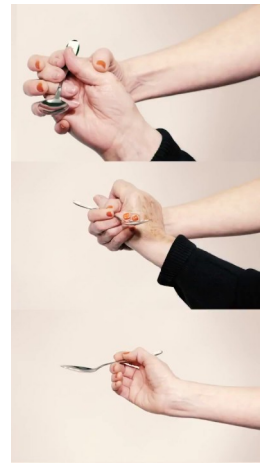
Chewing provides lots of sensory input during the day. Try using items for chewing such as Chewy Tubes or Chewelry that are designed for this. A sports bottle for drinking requires strong sucking and will also provide similar sensory input. Use a visual timetable to show times for eating.



Difficulty using cutlery

Strong motivation is needed to use cutlery as fingers can be quicker and easier.

If co-ordination is a problem, using larger handled or heavier cutlery may 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.



Seating arrangements

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. It will also allow them to chew and swallow their food properly and safely. It may also help if you eat altogether as a family and minimise distractions, or conversely allow them to eat to one side if they are affected by the noise of other people eating.



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The following could be supported by the use of Social Stories:

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

It is better to be honest and warn them in **advance** that it is different; in order to retain trust. Use visual supports or a Social Story to discuss the change.



Difficulty staying at the table and table manners

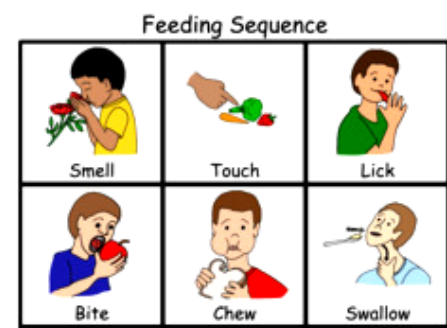
Try to build up time at the table from a very short time; and reward this. Rethink reasonable times and rules for mealtimes. Have clear social rules about eating out and eating at home. A Social Story or visual prompts can help a child to understand what is expected at the table, and practising through play can also reinforce this.

Refusing 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. Consider how much fluid your child is drinking as this can affect their appetite. Try smelling, touching, licking as a gradual process building up to tasting.



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Anxiety around mealtimes

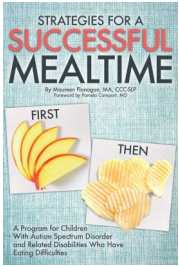
They may feel anxiety around mealtimes. Try to relax the pressure as this can lead to negative associations with food. Encourage positive behaviour and praise good choices at mealtimes. Keep your own worry and desperation in check and try to make your responses to their progress and failure as calm and low key as possible.

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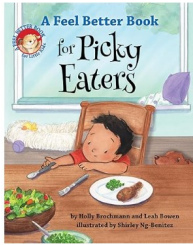


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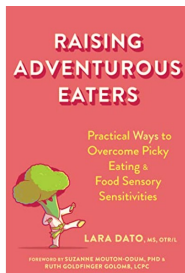
Book recommendations



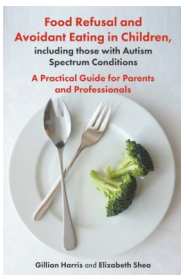
Strategies for a Successful Mealtime - Maureen Flanagan



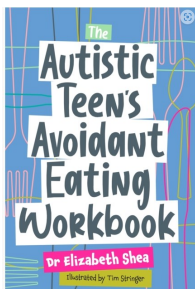
A Feel Better Book for Picky Eaters - Holly Brochmann



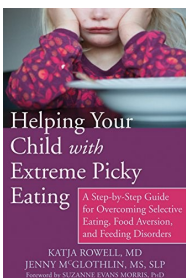
Raising Adventurous Eaters - Practical Ways to Overcome Picky Eating and Food Sensory Sensitivities - Lara Dato



Food Refusal and Avoidant Eating in Children including those with Autism Spectrum Conditions - Gillian Harris and Elizabeth Shea



Autistic Teen's Avoidant Eating Workbook - Dr Elizabeth Shea



Helping Your Child with Extreme Picky Eating – Katya Rowell

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