



Feeding Difficulties and Autism Spectrum Disorders

We know that feeding difficulties are very common in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). There are lots of things that can help you and your child start to overcome feeding issues. Whilst this journey is likely to be long, and at times slow, it is well worth the reward of better health and food flexibility.

Children with ASD can show some or all of the following difficulties with mealtimes:

- Difficulty sitting at the table or staying at the table for mealtimes
- Refusal to interact with or try new foods – sometimes even if they are being eaten by someone else or just on display in the same room
- Gagging or vomiting when trying new foods
- Struggling with the smell of certain foods, this may mean not eating hot foods which smell more
- Refusing to eat foods from one or more whole food groups-often this may be fruit and vegetables and/or protein especially meats and fish
- Refusing to eat certain textures (e.g. crunchy foods, soft foods or mixed textures)
- Only eating certain flavour foods such as very salty, sour or spicy food or very bland foods
- Being very particular about how a food is presented and rejecting any foods which look slightly different to 'normal'
- Refusing food unless it is their preferred brand
- Wanting foods to be a particular colour (often brown or beige)

Why does autism often mean eating problems?

There are many reasons that children with autism struggle with eating and drinking. The key reasons are that autism affects children both in how they think, how they communicate and how they experience sensations and eating and drinking uses all of these skills:

Communication

Children with ASD may find it hard to communicate their likes and dislikes, make choices about foods and let us know when they are hungry, thirsty or full.

Behaviour is a form of communication, Children may use their behaviour at mealtimes as a way of showing us what they want or to help them manage a situation they are finding difficult.



Social interaction

Mealtimes generally involve social behaviors and an understanding of social rules. Children with ASD can find social rules around mealtimes difficult to grasp (sit up nicely, don't play with your food, don't spit). They also tend to be less influenced by social approval than most children so eating with other people can just feel like more trouble than it's worth: all rules and little reward.

Flexibility of thinking

Children with autism can find it hard to be flexible and adaptable in their thinking, they like to keep things the same as this helps them to predict what will happen and reassure them that they can cope with it.

This means they can get very stuck on certain foods, certain ways of preparing food, and/or certain ways of presenting it. If things are changed then the child can feel that the food has fundamentally changed and it is often seen as unsafe and refused outright. This can be something as small as the packaging changes, you buying the wrong brand of food, or they get the wrong plate at the table.

Medical issues

Children with autism are at higher risk of medical problems which can effect eating, problems such as reflux, constipation, allergies, or tooth decay. If these affect your child, then eating can lead to pain or discomfort, lack of appetite and trouble sleeping.

Motor or sensory issues

Children with autism are often either over or under-sensitive to certain sensations. Eating involves using all of our sensory systems including sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and body awareness. If you struggle with sensory processing then eating is likely to be much more difficult.

A child whose mouth is very sensitive may only be able to cope with bland or soft food, while a child whose mouth-sensations are dulled may crave very strong-tasting or crunchy foods to give them some stimulation.

To add to this, some children with autism may have motor problems that make it difficult for them to use their jaw properly when chewing and swallowing, or to use knives, forks and spoons to feed themselves.



What can we do to help support children with ASD at mealtimes?

Communication

- Try having an 'I like' book which shows your child pictures of all the foods that they currently eat, having photo's of your child eating the food is even better. Use this book to talk about the foods they eat and to help them make choices at mealtimes.
- Ensure you have clear mealtime routines including starting and ending the meal so that your child knows exactly what is expected of them and for how long. Using a simple whiteboard with a 'now and next' drawn out may help.
- Keep communication at mealtimes relaxed and happy- try not to comment on what they are eating (or not!) and instead keep conversation about other topics.

Social Interaction

- Consider where your child sits at the table and how many people they have to interact with. Sitting them at the end of the table so they are not next to siblings may help. If you sit next to your child rather than opposite them this can help to take the pressure off you both and reduce the need for eye contact during mealtimes.
- Consider how long you expect your child to sit at the table for and when they can get down. Initially work on sitting for a short time and enjoying their food before leaving the table even if others have not finished.

Flexibility of Thinking

- Make a list of all the foods your child eats and try to ensure, where possible, that they don't have the same food more than once every other day. This helps to build range and stops children from restricting themselves to one particular food at a meal.
- Consider that all foods can be eaten at any time of day- give breakfast cereal as an afternoon snack or have a sausage and crackers at breakfast. Giving safe foods at alternative times helps build flexible thinking around foods.
- **Do not** try to trick your child by disguising one brand of food as another or hiding foods in their safe foods. Your child will know and may well then stop eating the safe food as well as the hidden food.
- Do try to build one small just noticeable change into one of your child's safe foods with their help and consent. This may be include:
 - changing the shape (cutting toast into squares/triangles/soldiers/cookie cutter),
 - changing the colour (cooking further, added food colouring, adding coloured ice cubes to a drink)
 - changing the temperature (freezing a yoghurt to make an ice lolly, warming a bread roll)
 - changing the way it is presented (tipping foods out of packets into a bowl, putting a sticker on a favourite bowl/cup)

Motor Skills

- Ensure that your child is well supported in a chair or highchair at mealtimes that allows their feet to be supported. If your child's feet don't reach the floor consider using a foot box under their feet to rest their feet on. This will help their postural control and motor skills and may also reduce fidgeting!
- Use child friendly cutlery, many children find using larger handled moulded cutlery such as 'caring cutlery' or 'nana's manners' cutlery which have specially moulded handles with indents for fingers is helpful.

Sensory

- When trying new foods consider foods which are very similar to the foods your child already eats, food chaining or moving from one food to another similar food helps children to bridge the gap between the food they are eating and the new food. See food chaining advice sheet for more details.
- Allow plenty of time and space to explore new foods with no pressure to eat. Have a separate 'trying plate' at the table and encourage your child to place a small amount of a new food on here and encourage them to explore it. Touch it with a fork, pick it up, smell it, lick it, try a bit and spit it out –these are all necessary steps to trying a new food. There should be no pressure to eat and you should expect that it will take multiple (10+) exposures of a food before a child may try it.
- Consider how you can use calming sensory activities before a mealtime to help regulate your child. Proprioceptive or heavy work activities may help your child calm and regulate before coming to the table.
- Consider opportunities for messy play away from the table. This play should be about exploring foods and getting messy with absolutely no pressure to eat. Start with dry ingredients and move on to wetter textures and then mixed textures. If your child is sensitive to messy play on their hands and face discuss this with your occupational therapist who will help you grade how to start.
- Encourage your child to be involved in other aspects of food preparation- shopping, baking, washing up all help to build exposure to foods.

Feeding problems in any child can be extremely stressful for both the child and the family and in a child with ASD you are often also coping with other challenges as well.

When deciding how to address your child's eating difficulties you need to bear in mind what is achievable for you as a family at this stage and how you will manage to implement these ideas over the months and years to come.

Children with ASD can successfully introduce and maintain varied diets but this is likely to take lots of patience, love and support from their parents.