

Sensory Issues and Feeding



General Tips

- Don't give up introducing new foods. It may take dozens of introductions before a child feels a food has become familiar enough to try it.
- Let your child have some control by letting them pick ONE new food they would *eventually* like to be able to eat.
- Take baby steps: first the child's job is to simply tolerate the food on their plate (not touching any other foods, if they insist), then to touch it to their mouth, then tongue, then take a bite and chew (and spit out if necessary).
- Keep a diary/ record of new foods they have tried and liked/ disliked – you may start to find a pattern with textures/ flavours.

Tactile (touch)

- Encourage exploration of textures and mixing textures (dipping foods in ketchup or salad dressing, mixing raisins and M&Ms into hot cereal, etc.).
- Change regular foods slightly to build openness to new textures, shapes, and colours.
- Involve the child in food preparation, making simple things such as sandwiches, fruit kebabs, little cakes or pizzas – this should encourage positive associations with food.

Auditory (sound):

- The child might find it too distracting to eat in a noisy canteen – find out if they could eat in a quiet room instead.
- Playing some favourite music or a story in the background can be relaxing, distracting from the usual anxiety around eating.
- Some children may benefit from wearing headphones or ear defenders when eating in busy environments.

Proprioceptive (Body awareness):

- Children with sensory issues often enjoy eating chewy or crunchy foods as this provides lots of calming proprioceptive feedback. Provide healthy crunchy or chewy foods for snacks such as carrot sticks, bread sticks, twiglets, pieces of bagel etc.

Shared Plate



Why use a shared plate of food?

- It is a great way of presenting food so that your child is able to choose what they want to eat, without them realising that you have chosen the food you want them to eat.
- It is also a great way for your child to become familiar with a variety of food, whether they eat it or not. You can introduce new or unfamiliar foods for your child to see, smell and possibly taste and eat without them having it put directly on their plate.
- Always offer some foods that your child will eat (at least one food) and one or more foods that your child doesn't eat or is unfamiliar with.

The idea is to present the food on one large plate or several small plates/bowls for all to help themselves to. Your child gets to pick what they want to eat and how big a portion they want to have.

We want your child to become confident at touching, smelling and handling different foods and not to feel pressure to taste and eat it. If they are happy to touch and explore food they will be happier to taste and try food in their own time. Often when pressure is placed on a child to eat food it puts them off exploring other foods as well.

At mealtimes:

- Allow your child to choose the food they want to and the combination of food they want to eat.
- Encourage them to use cutlery and to touch food with their hands.
- Don't ask them to try a certain food or to eat more but talk about the different foods.
- Your child may need to see the food several times until they will touch it and many more times until they taste it.
- During the meal your child may have chosen a food but once on their plate they decide they don't want to eat it; that is fine don't pressurise them to taste or eat. It is helpful to have a separate plate or bowl to put unwanted food on.
- Remember your child may not like a food they taste, very few people like every food.

Steps to Eating

Below is a diagram on steps to eating. It shows the stages children go through when trying a new food. Some children will get to the later stages much quicker than others where as for some children just tolerating being around a new or uncertain food can be too much for them. To encourage them to tolerate food, you may prepare food in their presence, eat certain foods when they are around (no pressure to try it though!) and slowly build up through the stages until eventually they begin to eat. It is important to remember that we all have food preferences and sometimes a child may not like a food – if you're child has social communication difficulties then it may be hard for them to understand why you are trying to make them try certain foods that they don't want to eat. This visual is really to help you understand the stages a child goes through to get to the point of eating a new food.

STEPS TO EATING

EATING

- chews and swallows whole bolus independently
- chews, swallows whole bolus with drink
- chews, swallows some and spits some
- bites, chews "x" times & spits out
- bites pieces, holds in mouth for "x" seconds & spits out
- bites off piece & spits out immediately
- full tongue lick
- licks lips or teeth

TASTE

- tip of tongue, top of tongue
- teeth
- lips
- nose, underneath nose
- chin, cheek
- top of head
- chest, neck
- arm, shoulder
- whole hand
- fingertips, fingerpads
- one finger tip

TOUCH

- leans down or picks up to smell
- odor in child's forward space
- odor at table
- odor in room

SMELLS

- uses utensils or container to serve self onto own plate/space
- uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink outside of own space
- uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink for others
- assists in preparation/set up with food

INTERACTS WITH

- looks at food when directly in child's space
- being at the table with the food just outside of child's space
- being at the table with the food ½ way across the table
- being at the table with the food on the other side of the table
- being in the same room

TOLERATES