

Advice for children with a restricted diet

All children go through periods of being more selective with the foods which they will eat. Difficult mealtimes are experienced by most parents.

Restricted eating can be common in children with sensory difficulties, children who have or who have previously been fed by feeding tube or children with a Social Communication Disorder.

The following booklet contains helpful advice and strategies on how you can support your child during and outside of mealtimes with their eating.



Contents

- 1. How to get the most from mealtimes** **Page 3**
Tips to make mealtimes a positive experience for you and your child.
- 2. Introducing new foods to your child** **Page 5**
Tips on how you can introduce new foods to your child in a gradual way.
Advice on how to recognise the types of foods your child prefers and how you can help them increase the variety in their diet by making small changes.
- 3. The importance of good seating** **Page 8**
Information about the importance of good sitting when eating.
Tips on how you can support your child at mealtimes.
- 4. How our sense affect our eating** **Page 10**
Information about our senses and how these can impact upon children's eating.
Advice on activities which can support the development of skills and how to get your child's sensory system ready to eat.
- 5. Exploring food through play** **Page 14**
Ideas for activities which can help you introduce your child to new foods in a fun way.
- 6. Helping children get the right nutrition** **Page 16**
Tips to help you include all the nutrients your child needs into their diet.
- 7. Other factors to consider** **Page 17**
Information regarding factors that may impact upon eating or your child's health.
- 8. Helpful links** **Page 17**
Links to local resources, books, websites and TV programmes that can support you and your child.

1: Getting the most from meal times

- Always keep calm as children can pick up on the emotions of their parents. Don't force your child to eat, this can make their eating worse.
- Stop asking them to try food. They will try when they feel confident and safe.
- Encourage your child to sit with you to eat. Show them that you are calm and having a pleasant time. Even if they sit with you for a short period that is fantastic progress.
- Limit meal times to 30 minutes.
- Experiment by changing the environment, try making it quiet by turning off the TV or you could try with a small amount of background noise.
- Establish a regular routine for meals and snacks. Try to give food at a similar time each day.
- Look at how the rest of the family eat. Can they be messy? If so maybe move the child to the side of the messy eater? If other family members can be loud when they eat or eat with their mouth open this can put some children off. So try moving positions at the dining table.



- Try not to repeat meals for 3 days as much as possible. Allowing the child to eat the same food day after day can mean they will go off the food and you can lose this from their diet. If they do lose it you can always try and reintroduce in a month or so. This can be a hard point to carry out as child might have limited diet, but start by alternating days.
- Role modelling is very important, make positive faces and noises when eating together. Do not try eating something new in front of them, just in case you don't like it, as your face will give it away.



- Try to offer food in bowl rather than out of the packet. This can help if the food label changes and the child will only eat a certain type.
- Cooking with your child allows them to see what foods go into the preparation. Involve them in shopping and food preparation as much as possible.
- A lot of children are visual learners, try themed meals using 'My world kitchen' on CBeebies for ideas.
- Use small plates rather than a large plate to not overwhelm them, your child can always ask for more.



- Try not to wipe food away instantly or make a fuss if the child makes a mess. Sensory activities provide children with another meaningful avenue for learning. Because children learn best by having “hands on” experiences with materials, sensory experiences are vital to young children’s learning, and adds to their optimal development and physical health.
- Remember the Rule of 3. It is important to offer foods your child already likes, as well as foods your child does not yet like. A good rule of thumb is to only offer three foods at a time. Include one to two foods your child already likes and one food your child does not yet like. If your child will not tolerate the new food on his or her plate, place the new food near him or her on a separate plate ('leaner plate') to help get your child used to the new food.
- Present new foods in small bites and in fun or familiar ways to make it more likely that your child will eat it.

2: Introducing new foods to your child

- Encourage your child to accept being in the same room as a new food.
- Encourage them to look at a new food, if possible engage them in a conversation or activity that involves the new food.
- Put a tiny amount (size of finger nail or less) on a learner plate near their plate. This can be at the other end of the table to them. If they allow this and don't get upset, next time they have exposure to this food, it can be brought a little closer to them, but only gradually (this should be a food the rest of the family are eating).
- Encourage your child to smell the new food. Get involved by smelling the food too – your child may copy.
- Encourage your child to touch the new food with their fingers.
- Encourage your child to bring the food to their face, then to their lips ('kiss the food') and then bring to their tongue. Do this at a rate that suits your child – some children may do all steps at one mealtime, others will take several.
- Encourage your child to lick the new food then put it in their mouth (they can remove the food and place into a tissue without chewing and swallowing – this step allows them to experience the taste and feel of the food in their mouth).
- Encourage your child to bite, chew (approximately 5 – 10 times) and then swallow a very small amount of the food.
- Finally - gradually increase the amount of food eaten. The food then becomes an accepted food for your child. Then start the process all over again with another new food. Remember it can take several months to introduce a new food so don't give up.

Recognise food patterns

List the foods your child likes to eat – describe the textures, colours and flavours:

- Crunchy, soft, dry, wet or sloppy
- White, beige or particular colour e.g. orange
- Sweet, savoury, strong flavours or bland
- Do they eat different textures but separately? E.g. crunchy dry cereal with a drink of milk (but not mixed together)

Use this list to work out taste, texture and colour preferences. Try to think of other foods which match this description (e.g. If they prefer white, soft, bland foods offer similar foods such as rice, cauliflower, spaghetti, chicken).

Increasing the variety of the diet

- A social story could help a child understand why we eat and the function of food. Their favourite characters / hobbies could be used.
- Produce a clear daily and/or weekly menu of foods. The time should be displayed next to the meals. Visual tools can help a child express and recognise needs, preferences and hunger.
- Make a food progress chart. Put pictures of accepted foods on the chart and pictures of food they wish to try and then you or the child can record progress on the chart.
- Some children will be more accepting of foods which are presented in a consistent way. An example of this would be tinned or pre chopped fruit and vegetables which always look the same shape without any darker bits on the skin. Processed foods are predictable, they are designed to look and taste the same every time you eat them. These foods can help children with sensory issues.
- If the child has been able to engage with a new food a motivator can be given as a treat e.g. if they help with the cooking, or touch the new food with their fingertip. They might have 5 minutes longer to play with their motivator.
- Children also need to learn how to chew so get them to look at you when you put something in your mouth so they can see you're over exaggerated chewing motion.



- A king's taster is when your child will try something off another person's plate they have confidence in, even if the same food is on their plate. Try taking a little off their plate and eating it, so they can see their plate is safe too.



No emphasis should be put on tasting it, it's just about tolerating it.

Food chaining

- In this process the child is presented with a new food that is similar in texture, taste or temperature to the accepted food. Below are some examples of how

you could try this:

- If bread is accepted, try offering a smaller loaf (same brand), a thin or thick cut loaf (same brand), then move onto unsliced bread, then pitta bread, then ciabatta, then pizza crusts and baguette.
- If toast is accepted, fold over the toast to make it look like a sandwich, put this on a plate and see if they will tolerate it. Leave the other slice of toast flat, they might copy what you have done but just might leave it on their plate and only eat the flat piece. This is important to do each day as it will help to build up exposure and help them adapt to change. Then try making the toast lighter in colour, only doing so if they accept this. Gradually you can change the colour of the toast to lighter until it's not being toasted.
- If squirty cream is accepted, try offering a pouring cream, then yoghurt, then custard, then try rice pudding
- If crisps are accepted, try vegetable crisps or carrots puffs, then homemade oven cooked vegetable crisps, then roasted vegetables

3: The importance of good seating

- Feet dangling can cause distraction and make children feel unsafe. Put a box/step under feet to help make them feel safe and sit up.



- Look how the child sits on the chair. If they are sitting like the child in the picture below then they may benefit from having support at their sides? If so use a chair with arms or place them next to a wall so that they have support on one side.





- It's helpful to keep a child in the highchair for as long as the child is able to safely fit. Highchairs support when eating. Children often feel safer when their feet are supported.



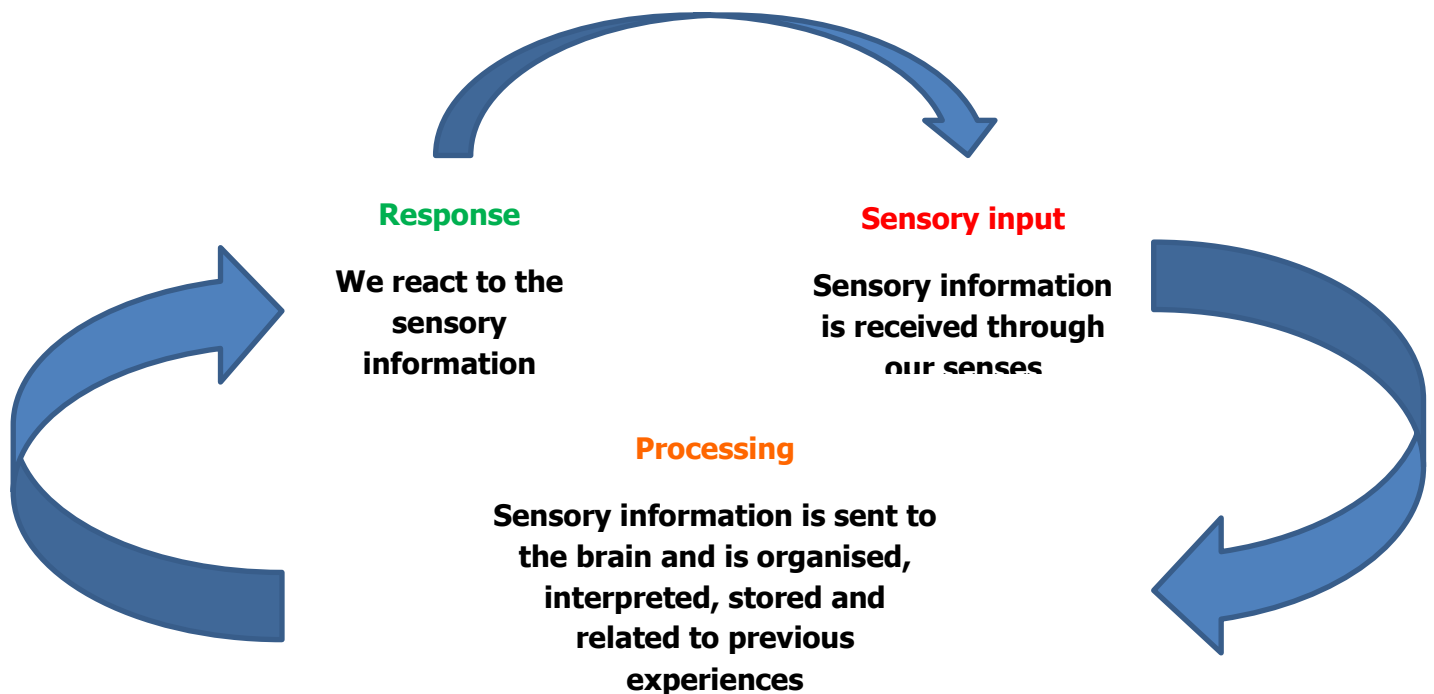
- The picture above shows a good way of introducing children to eating as family if they are unable to tolerate a highchair to start with, try having a picnic on the floor with the family and then try transitioning to a chair or highchair.

4: How our senses effect our eating

- The body receives information through the senses and the world around us.
- The information is sent to the brain
- The brain tries to work out what the information is
- The brain sends a message to respond to the information

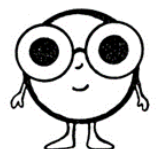
When sensory information is processed correctly, we can then complete all our daily activities efficiently without much thought.

We use this information in many ways – to help us understand our body, understand the environment and successfully interact with the world.



How the senses impact on feeding

Sight



Our sight helps us to focus on what we need to and respond appropriately. It helps us to locate and follow objects.

How our sight can impact on feeding:

- Having the ability to locate food, utensils, chair, table etc.
- Our motivation to eat can depend on how we perceive the look of the food

- Having the ability to concentrate and focus when we are eating



Hearing

Our ears help us to identify/understand/respond to what is seen. This plays an important role in how we interpret our environment and how we interact with other people.

How our hearing can impact on feeding:

- Having the ability to concentrate and focus when we are eating
- How we hear and understand what is expected of us
- How we tolerate sounds associated with eating e.g. cutlery scraping a plate

**it is important to note that if there are concerns in this area a hearing test should always be sought to rule out any other medical difficulties.*



Smell and taste

Both senses are there to identify if a taste/smell is safe or harmful to the body. Both have a huge impact of food preferences and the enjoyment of food. Smell is linked to a part of our brain that is associated with our behaviour, mood and memories.

How smell/taste can impact on feeding:

- If a child is overly sensitive to a smell or cannot smell the food then they may not be motivated to eat it
- The smells of food cooking/raw food can put the child off eating the cooked food.

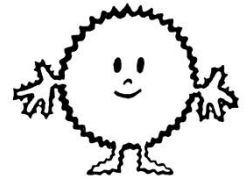
Touch

We register most of our basic sensations through touch e.g. pressure, pain, temperature. The receptors we have in our skin and mouth pick up the sensory information and relay it to the brain. Touch helps to protect us acting as an alarm to inform us of danger. It also gives us information about objects and our environment and supports development of refined fine motor skills

How touch can impact on feeding:

- Being unable to feel what is in your mouth and being unable to chew/swallow

- Being over-sensitive to things in mouth meaning eating can be uncomfortable/painful
- Not being able to hold/use cutlery/carry a plate
- Being overly-sensitive to temperature in the mouth



Body awareness

Our body awareness helps us know where our body parts are without looking at them. It helps us to place our body parts and move them correctly and appropriately. It helps with planning and co-ordinating movements.



How our body awareness can impact on feeding:

- Knowing where our mouth/hands are and being able to pick food up and bring to our mouths
- Being able to eat food without getting it on our face, hands, clothes
- Knowing where our tongue is so we can move food around mouth
- Being able to sit upright with our feet on the floor to give us a safe eating position

Balance

Our balance helps us to recognise movement and balance. It helps us to stay upright and move our head as needed.

How our balance can impact on feeding:

- Staying sat upright on a chair to eat safely
- Being able to move our head and arms to eat without falling over



Internal body sense

This is the sense that allows us to notice our internal body signals e.g. hunger, thirst, needing to go to the toilet, pain, temperature.

How our internal senses can impact on feeding:

- Knowing when we are hungry or full
- Knowing when we are thirsty
- Recognising the temperature of food so that we can eat without burning ourselves
- Awareness of pain e.g. toothache



Activity Suggestions for feeding

These activities can be used throughout the day in play with your child. They will help to both develop the physical skills needed to eat and also help to prepare your child's sensory system for eating.

- Play with mouth noises: buzzing like a bee, clicking tongue, blowing raspberries
- Play with making faces in a mirror or imitating others' funny faces: open mouth wide, sticking tongue out, smiling, frowning, filling cheeks up with air
- Singing or humming
- Blowing bubbles, instruments e.g. flutes, trumpets, whistles
- Blow up balloons or blow out candles
- Vibration (battery powered toothbrush, vibrating toys on cheeks/lips). Note that vibration can be intense sensory input, if your child refuses, take baby steps to help them get used to the sensation. Never force.
- Sucking thicker liquids (milk shakes, smoothies) through a straw (sucking can be focusing and help with attention)
- Drinking from a water bottle opening that requires sucking
- Sucking on cold items e.g. ice lollies, ice cubes
- Chewy toys. These are great for a child that seeks out mild oral stimulation during the day; they offer different levels of resistive input e.g. chewing pencil tops or erasers, others come in cool designs that look like jewelry or accessories rather than just an oral sensory tool.

5: Exploring food through play

Messy play provides the child with fun way to experience new textures. Increased exposure to a wide variety of textures can decrease the level of tactile defensiveness.

Children need to learn about new foods in an unthreatening way. They need lots of exposure to a food before they will consider tasting it or eating it. Mealtimes are frequently associated with expectations, many children spend a great deal of energy protecting themselves from new sensory experiences that feel dangerous. Comfort and safety are the most important aspects of a mealtime. When children feel safe and comfortable, they are more willing to risk and participate in new experiences.

By allowing your child to play with food outside of mealtimes they will learn to be more confident around food. Therefore there is a greater chance they will be more willing to experience food in other ways. As adults we must make it fun for the child and not try to convince the child to take a bite, therefore allowing the child to become familiar with food, through play.

You may find you need to play with the same foods over and over, as through repeated exposure they will become more confident and enjoy playing with them. If they don't tolerate a certain texture or food, leave it for a while but try again at a later time.

Allow them to play with food in different ways, for example:

- Encourage your child to help you make other people's sandwiches, you can cut the sandwiches into different shapes or if they like crunchy textures introduced crackers instead of bread
- Zip bags games can allow foods to be touched without child becoming messy. You can put any food inside the bag and maybe a couple of their toys or a laminated sheet e.g. use numbers/letters or something the child would be interested in. They then have to push the food to find the toy or number on sheet. This is a fun way of exposing new foods.



- Use your child's motivator to your advantage. So if they like numbers/letters then you can make a game of hide and seek in a bowl with a food covering them.

If your child is eating a non-food item e.g. a stick

- Try and replace the item with a food item of similar colour, texture or size. It's better to replace than just say no. The child needs an alternative and some explanation. So you could say sticks are for birds.

Progression is usually better if the food has been included in messy food play, completely separate to mealtimes.

Don't forget to make it fun!

6: Helping children get the right nutrition

Good nutrition is important as diet not only effects health but also mood, sleep and ability to learn.

Once you have identified patterns in preferred textures / colour you could experiment when offering fruit and vegetables e.g. fresh (soft), frozen (crunchy and cold), dried (crunchy and room temperature), smoothie (liquid), frozen into an ice-lolly (cold and a more consistent texture). You could also add food colouring to change to preferred colours.

Giving fortified alternatives of bread, milk, cereal, squash or juice can improve the nutrient content of the diet.

You may also be able to fortify the diet by adding ground nuts, nutritional yeast, blended vegetables into savoury sauces. You could boil pasta / rice in milk or milk alternatives.

A severely restricted diet has been linked to low levels of certain nutrients (vitamins B3, B6, C, calcium, iron and zinc).

It may be beneficial for your child to take a multivitamin and mineral supplement. These are available in liquid or chewy preparations. The liquid preparations can sometimes be added to accepted drinks. It might be useful to ensure the supplement contains iron.

Limiting foods which are high in fat or sugar to minimise risk of obesity or filling up on non-nutritious foods.

7: Other factors to consider

If you suspect that your child has a food hypersensitivity (when the body reacts to certain foods) this can impact their eating. Many children experiencing constipation, bloating, reflux or tooth decay struggle to eat. Treating these issues can have a big impact on their eating. If you have concerns about these issues speak to your GP or Paediatrician.

People with a restricted diet can sometimes eat too much of foods containing fat and sugar, it's important that these foods are only offered in moderation to decrease risk of becoming overweight.

8: Helpful links

Local resources:

- Public Health Wales dietetics - www.nutritionskillsforlife.com or @NutritionSkills on Twitter
- CTMUHB dietetics - @CTMUHBDietetics on Twitter

Suggested Reading on Messy Play and Messy Play Activities

- The Little Book of Messy Play by Sally Featherstone
- Fun With messy Play by Tracey Beckerleg

Suggested TV programs:

- My world kitchen on CBeebies

Suggested Websites:

- yourkidstable.com (seating, chewing)

This booklet was produced by Dietetics, OT and Play Specialist within Cwm Taf Morgannwg Health Board, 2021.