

NAIT: Supporting children's eating and drinking Tips for parents and carers

Introduction

Over 75% of autistic children have unusual eating preferences, including food refusal, however most do not have severe nutritional difficulties and grow well. Height and weight can be measured by a doctor to check this.

Some children eat selectively because of

- sensory responses to the texture, smell, taste and look of food
- a preference for predictability, rituals, routines and rules
- poor appetite or reduced awareness of hunger and thirst
- difficulty generalising and focussing more than others on the look, taste or texture of foods, so that they may not accept if food is broken, over/undercooked, a different colour, in or not in a packet they expect, marked, burnt or combined with or touching other foods

Research has shown that increasing exposure to foods gradually can increase acceptance. Typically people have to eat something about 16 times before we begin to like it. In children with autism, this may be many times more.

Some children seem to want to eat constantly or demand favourite foods (e.g. sugary sweets, crisps, drinks) outside of meal times but refuse other food. If they snack or drink a lot, they may not be hungry for meals.

- Changing eating patterns can take time and persistence and you can decide to focus on this issue, if and when it feels like the priority for your child and family.
- This information can be used simply as helpful information or it can be used jointly with a parent/ carer and a professional with relevant experience, working together to support the process if this is a current priority.
- Please remember that each child is an individual and some of these tips have worked for other children but they may not work for your child. We recommend a flexible approach where you pick a couple of things to try and introduce them one at a time. Enlist support to persist patiently!

NB: If you have any concern about your child choking on food or drinks or you notice that they have a physical difficulty swallowing please seek medical advice

A food and drink diary

If you would like to make changes, it can be helpful to observe and use a diary to gather information about your child's current eating pattern over a period of time (e.g. 3 days). There is a blank diary at the end of this guidance. You can record:

- What they eat and how much
- What types of food
- When, where and with whom
- How other factors affect them – e.g. what's going on around them. Tiredness, being overly hungry, pain, anxiety or excitement

Create a structured daily routine

- Serving three meals and planned snacks at similar times each day helps establish a routine
- Sticking to a predictable routine minimises anxiety
- Think about having set places to sit and eat, such as a small table and minimal distractions (increases predictability, reduces stress)
- Consider eating meals away from the kitchen where they are cooked (cooking smells and sounds may be too intense for some)
- Use visual supports (suited to your child's stage) to show the sequence around mealtimes
- If you do provide a visual sequence, make sure they can see it at all times
- Support the transition from activities before the meal to the meal verbally, with simple repetitive language (e.g. toys in the box, then snack time)
- Support the transition from activities before the meal to the meal with a transition object (e.g. give them their cup to take to the table)
- Support the transition to post meal activities to help them know what is happening next
- Set expectations and keep meal times brief

Food refusal – helpful tips, to get started

If your child refuses to try new foods, you could try the following to encourage them. Remember it might take months of offering a new food for a child to readily accept it, so gentle persistence may be needed

- **Never force a child to touch or try food**
- **Food play (no eating)**
 - Use real food in play with no expectation to eat it. Introduce a variety of textures (e.g. dried pasta, cooked pasta, breadsticks, angel delight)
 - Allow them to use an implement to engage with the food instead of fingers if they prefer (e.g. a spoon or cup)
 - Play with objects or toys associated with food (e.g. pans, bowls, cups cutlery)
 - Bake and cook together
- **Real food**
 - Let them feed food to you and share pleasure and fun
 - Have a bowl each with the same food
 - Have something to hand that they can wipe with or spit into
 - Start with familiar or accepted brands and food with an accepted texture, taste or colour (e.g. do they prefer dry, crunchy, salty food? Or something else?)
 - Serve small portions (large amounts are off putting)
 - Some children like mirrors or puppets and enjoy playing and copying actions they see
- **Work on one area at a time**
 - If introducing a new taste, keep textures and temperatures familiar and constant
 - Increase quantities of new foods gradually
 - Set realistic and clear expectations of amount (e.g. 2 grapes)

Grazers

Some children snack or graze, eating frequently throughout the day, which leads to them being less hungry at planned meal and snack times. They may hold out for sugary or unhealthy snacks they prefer. This can have a negative impact on weight gain and dental health. If they have eaten in the last couple of hours and you do not think they are hungry you can:

- Keep these 'high demand' foods out of sight and out of reach to prevent them helping themselves
- Redirect them and find other fun things for them to do in the daily routine
- Limit snacking – try not to give in to demand
- Persist with establishing routine meal and snack times and a place for eating at home/ school/ nursery

Motivation and keeping it going

- Your child continues to need structure and predictability at mealtimes. They will benefit from knowing what to expect
- You could offer choices on a choice board, to let them have control over what they eat and to know what is available. You can add pictures of new foods even before they have tried them as long as there are familiar ones to choose from too
- You could use their special interests to make mealtimes more fun (e.g. if they like numbers, counting the number of peas they will eat, or if they like 'Thomas' having a Thomas the Tank Engine plate or placemat)
- Expanding the variety and quantity of food might take time
- For some children a scrapbook of 'my food' or fun stories about food can make food less scary and more fun. Together you could cut out and stick pictures of food and sort them into ones they like or don't like on one page and another page for food I might try
- Although some children respond to stickers and rewards, the best motivation is when the thing you do is fun and enjoyable and you experience success yourself
- Autistic children might like praise for trying but they might prefer that you don't make a big deal
- Some more verbal children might like Social Stories to help them understand the rules and expectations or how to cope in different social contexts where people offer them food that they do not like, or how to request food they prefer instead
- Once you have a good routine in place, you could encourage them to take a small piece of a new food onto their plate or on a plate beside theirs (e.g. one pea). Give them permission not to eat the new food

Sitting still

If your child finds it hard to sit still for eating,

- Think about activities before mealtimes that will allow them to have had movement and be calm
- If seated, make sure they are stable in their seat and have their feet on the floor or a foot rest
- Sit still alongside them to model good sitting for eating and eat together

- Some children may stay longer if they can stand up to eat
- Set realistic expectations of the length of meal times (e.g. 5 minutes)
- Visual supports or timers might help them know how long they will sit for
- Gradually increase the time in small increments over time
- If not in your usual eating place, expect less

Motor skills

Young children usually chew and mouth objects and this should be encouraged (with safe objects). They may also enjoy playing with and exploring food items even if they are not eating them.

- If your child seems to need to chew non-food items a lot, you can discuss with professionals how to provide this for them safely
- These activities help them to learn about shape, taste and texture and to learn about their own mouth, how much force to bite with or to keep their lips shut, how much can fit in it and how to move things around in their mouth with their tongues

Full motor development in the mouth and jaw is necessary for us to bite off and chew certain foods. If you are concerned about your child's motor skills for eating, you could request assistance or advice from a Speech and Language Therapist or Occupational therapist.

Introducing new food

To take the pressure off meal times, we advise trying new foods away from these times in **'tasting sessions'** as part of the daily routine

- Ensure the child knows what to expect and use visual supports (e.g. they might stir, sniff, touch, lick, bite). Help them learn these words
- Use baking or chopping with real food, especially with food you think they might be curious about
- Only focus on one new food at a time and set small goals
- Sort food by its properties (texture, temperature)
- Make it clear they do not have to eat the new food
- Remain calm and do not make a fuss about their reaction
- Have a 'finished' box where food can go when it's finished
- Move from being near the food to holding and touching, licking, putting it in their mouth and biting (it's always ok to spit it out)
- You might use a visual support (first taste, then finished)
- Have a drink and wiping cloths available

Nutrition

Try to offer food in each of the five food groups each day, as shown in the 'eat well' plate below. If you are concerned about your child's nutritional intake, please contact a health professional. Here are some tips:

Fruit and Vegetables

- Add vegetables to home-made muffins (e.g. carrots or courgettes)
- Make lollypops out of fruit juice/ smoothies

- Leave chunks of fruit or carrots out on a plate for nibbles
- Try vegetables coated in breadcrumbs

Cereals

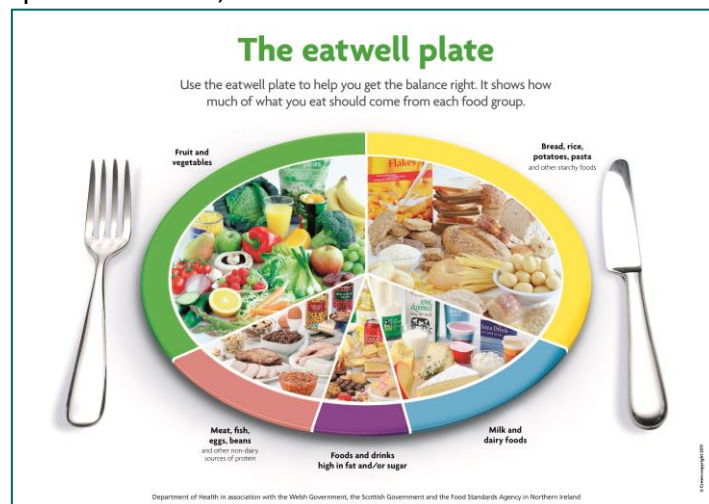
- Give popcorn rather than crisps to increase fibre. It is great to help constipation
- Use breakfast cereals as dry snacks throughout the day as they can be a good source of vitamins and iron
- Eat breakfast cereal along with fresh fruit juice. This helps absorb iron

Drinks

- Be aware that drinks rich in calories can limit appetite for food at snack or mealtimes (e.g. milk, fruit juice and fizzy or sweetened drinks)
- Try gradually reducing the number and amount of energy and calorie-rich drinks such as milk or juice to encourage increased appetite for food
- Dilute juice with water
- Give milk only after food is taken

Meat

- Puree meat into gravy and serve over potatoes or pasta
- Try pate or meat paste on bread, toast or crackers



Visual Supports: Social Partners

At this stage children do not readily understand verbal language, symbols or pictures used to represent objects and actions. You may wish to use:

- A **'song signifier'** – sing the same song to indicate a transition to snack or mealtimes
- An **'object signifier'** – use an object the child can hold to help them understand that a snack time is the next activity and to support transition. For example hold a cup and say 'juice' 'time for juice'. Let them carry the cup to the table. You could also use a plate, a spoon or even a plastic box containing the food to be eaten
- The child might have a preference for a particular colour of cup or a particular plate. Try to encourage them with motivating objects
- You might want to try showing photos and symbols to see how the child responds

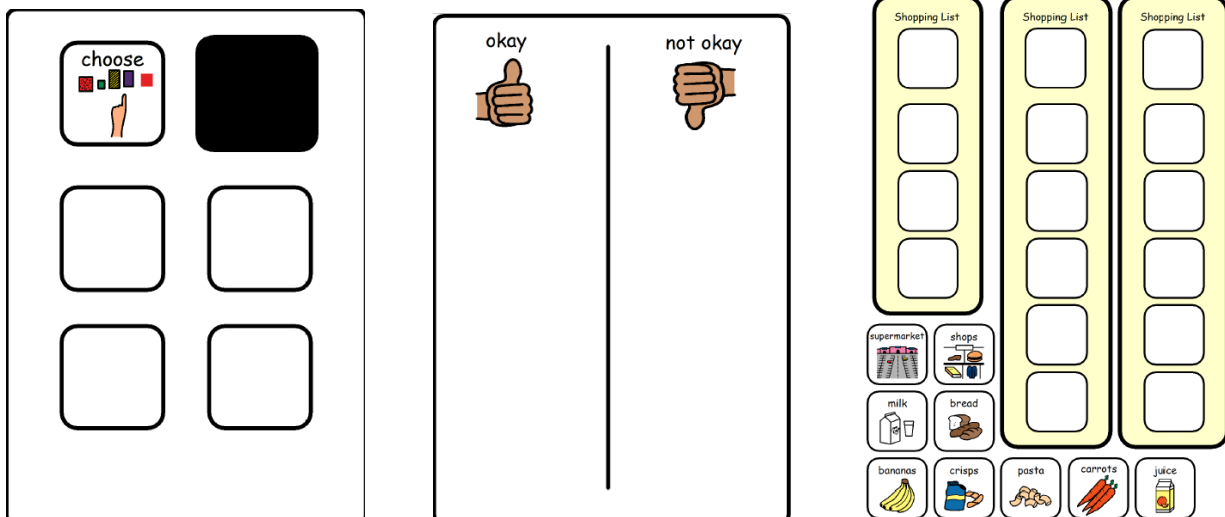
Visual Supports: Language and Conversation Partners

At this stage children recognise photographs and symbols and a range of visual supports can be helpful. If using them around food, it helps to laminate them. Always think about the relevance to the individual child and family context. Some visual supports you might use are:

- A choice board – with 2 or more items, to support the child to make a choice about what they eat or drink
- A shopping list – to engage the child in looking at and buying the food they like in short trips to familiar shops
- A 'recipe' with pictures to help them prepare and make food they might eat (or not eat yet). For example, you could have pictures or videos of simple sequences for making jelly, toast with spreads, or chopping fruit or cheese
- A 'placemat' – you could make and laminate a placemat with space to match the plate, spoon, fork or knife. You can include motivating pictures of the child, of food they like or even of a favourite TV character. This can help with waiting and motivation to stay at the table for slightly longer
- A visual sequence, so that they know what is happening before and after snack or lunchtime
- You could use a 'like' and 'don't like' sorting board to sort foods they like and don't like. They could use it to find out what other people like and don't like

Some examples of these visual supports made and shared with permission of ©Mayer Johnson Boardmaker, can be found on the NAIT website <https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources/>

Visual Support examples:



now	next

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<p>school</p>	<p>nursery</p>	<p>art</p>	<p>eat</p>	<p>breakfast</p>	<p>lunch</p>
<p>story</p>	<p>TV</p>	<p>listen to music</p>	<p>dinner</p>	<p>supper</p>	<p>snack</p>
<p>iPad</p>	<p>garden</p>	<p>play</p>			
<p>choose</p>	<p>tidy up</p>	<p>home</p>			

*This document was developed based on the NHS Lothian Guidance on this topic created by a multidisciplinary group in 2013, with their kind permission

Food and drink daily diary						Things I've noticed
Date:						
Time (start and finish of eating*)						
Place (where and how) E.g. t home, in high chair in the kitchen, with favourite red plate						
Other people Who was there? What were they doing?						
Food and drink offered (type and amount)						
Amount taken?						
How did it go?						
Successes?						
Concerns?						
Communication How did you let your child know what was happening at the meal time?						

*Include all types of eating and drinking whether it was helping themselves, grazing or a planned meal or snack time or from a plate, cup or bottle