

Autism and restrictive eating

- Possible reasons your child could be having issues with food
- Finding possible causes and patterns
- Strategies to help your child eat new foods

Possible reasons your child could be having issues with food

➡ **Discomfort or illness**

The first thing to rule out is if certain food give them physical pain or discomfort. Your child might be experiencing gut pain, constipation, heartburn, etc. Additionally, its important to keep in mind that some medication can affect appetite or stomach problems. You can help your child communicate their pain by using visual stress scales, PECS, pictures of body parts or pain scales.

➡ **Sensory processing differences**

Many people with autism experience sensory input differently. They can be more or less sensitive to certain environmental information captured by their senses (e.g., olfactory, taste, sight, touch). When it comes to eating, your child might be more sensitive to the food's texture, color, spices, smells, temperature, etc.

➡ **Environment**

There might be elements about the environment that could be distracting or making your child feel uncomfortable. For example, the plates, the television, the chair, the light, etc. Try to see if they are keener to eat in certain places or with certain people.

Possible reasons your child could be having issues with food

➔ **Social considerations**

Some people prefer to eat in the company of other family members or friends and be more willing to try new foods with them. Others might find the social aspect of mealtime stressful. They might be more willing to eat when being alone or in the company of one person.

➔ **Routines**

People with autism like sticking to their routine, they feel comfortable knowing what comes next. This might explain why they feel resistant to add new foods to their menu. Try introducing new foods one by one. Include them in their menu and routine in advance.

➔ **Coping strategies**

Some people with autism might feel overwhelmed by the challenges they face on daily basis. Some people may avoid food due to their generalize anxiety and feeling they lack control. Understanding what they are going through and encouraging different coping skills can help.

Finding possible causes and patterns

A food diary can be helpful when you are not sure what is causing your child to avoid eating. Take notes about what, when and how they eat. After some time, you may be able to recognize patterns and factors that affect their eating habits.

Food Diary

What time did they eat? 6.30pm

What did they eat? Potato mash and chicken nuggets

How much did they eat? All the nuggets, left some potato mash

Who was there? Me, himself and his sister

How did they reacted when they saw the food? Happy about the nuggets, played with potato mash before eating it

How long did it take for them to eat the food? 30min

How did the people around them reacted when he/she ate the food? we celebrated because he ate almost everything

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

The following pages describe 7 strategies that could help your child eat new foods.

It is not recommended to apply all these strategies, it could be overwhelming and stressful for them.

Focus on recognizing what strategies could be helpful for your child and start incorporating them gradually.

Remember to be patient, the process of introducing new foods can be slow.

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

I Introducing changes to their routine

Remember that children with autism like a clear routine. Just like any other task, introduce it in their weekly routine. A predictable experience can help them feel safe and comfortable. You can write a weekly menu and use pictures to indicate the food. You should serve the exact food you show in their weekly routine, without changing any ingredients.

It is advisable to first introduce new foods during the weekend because they are more relaxed. This way you can also have control of their other meals, making sure to give them something they will enjoy and doesn't cause stress.

You can remind them through the week what is the new food they are trying. Afterwards, try to incorporate a small amount of this food daily.

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

2 Rely on visual support

When introducing any change, clear and consistent communication is key. Often, people with autism are visual communicators. Therefore, they understand and retain information more effectively when it is presented in a visual manner. Here are some ideas of visual support:

➡ Produce daily or weekly menus

Together, create a menu that includes the time and food they are going to eat. You can include the specific brands or ingredients if you feel this would bring comfort to your child.

➡ Provide visual tools to help your child express their feelings and preferences

(e.g., stress scales, hunger and fullness scales, or happy/unhappy face pictures)

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

Introduce a food book

Place pictures of foods that the person likes in the front of the book, and those they don't at the back. As they expand their diet, the pictures can be gradually moved forward in the book.

Create a social story

They are short descriptions that give information of what to expect in a particular situation, event or activity. The content would vary depending on your child's own needs and resistance regarding food.

Ideas for Social Stories

- Someone trying new foods: feeling afraid and uncomfortable at first, but then enjoying the food.
- The function of food and how it provides energy.
- Going shopping and the fun aspects of trying new foods.

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

3 Positive Reinforcement

Reward your child for trying new foods.

Verbal praise can be helpful, because it gives your child the sense of being supported and celebrated. You can praise your child in every step of the process. Say things like “great job, you could smell the carrots. You are doing great!” or “thank you for having a bite of the bread”. Very enthusiastic praise and recognition encourages the child to repeat it.

You can also use a token system or reward with their favorite activities. Reinforcement works better when the reward is received right after the achievement.

Try not to reward with a food they do like and prefer. This could make eating the new food appear like a chore.

Never punish your child for not eating the new food.

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

4 Food Chaining

Is a method which emphasizes similar features between accepted and targeted food items. Think about a food that you want to introduce and how you can connect it to a food they enjoy. In this process, you give your child new foods that share similarities to foods they like (temperature, textures, flavours).

These similar foods become steps between the food the child already eats and the food you want to introduce to their diet.



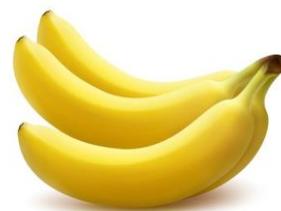
1. Crisps



2. Banana Chips



3. Sliced banana



4. Bananas

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

Chains can be long or short, simple or complicated. Be patient when going through the different steps of the chain. It might take your child some time to adapt to these changes.

If they have a favourite sauce or side, include it in the different stages of the chain so they always have something familiar in the plate.

A common example of food chaining begins with a child's favorite chicken nuggets and ends with acceptance of a mild white fish.

In between might include different brands of chicken nuggets, shapes, batters. Then breaded fish sticks, and eventually a plain mild white fish.

To learn more about food changing visit:

https://www.sensorysolutions.org/application/files/22/14/9815/7292/Food_School_Handout-1.pdf

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

5 Create connections between accepted foods and new foods

When presenting a new food, highlight the similarities it has with accepted food. Sometimes children with autism have difficulties to make those connections by themselves. Foods might be similar in color, taste, texture or look.

Say things like:

“its crunchy, like the chips you like”

“it’s warm and creamy like the potato mash you like”

“it also has chocolate, like your favorite birthday cake”.

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

6 Preparing food together

Sometimes a child can be more interested in eating the food when they are involved in the preparation.

This could be ***meal planning, grocery shopping and cooking together.***

When cooking, the child has the chance to explore the food and be creative. All these steps help the child prepare for the new food, making it more predictable.

Cooking activities that can help your child familiarize and feel comfortable around food:

- ➡ Arranging foods on trays and plates
- ➡ Tearing herbs and greens
- ➡ Mixing ingredients
- ➡ Measuring ingredients

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

6 Play

Some exploratory and sensory play with food can help your child feel more comfortable around them and view food in a positive way.

It is helpful for children to get to know new foods before their actual mealtime. This way, your child gets exposure to new foods and ingredients, without the stress or pressure of thinking about eating them.

Identify something your child might enjoy and then think about ways to incorporate food into it. Does your child like to move, art, sensory exploration, organizing?

In the next two pages you can find some ideas for playing with food

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

- ➡ **Fruits and Vegetable stamps:** a fun and easy way to express yourself and explore food at the same time. You can make stamps with potatoes, apples, lemons, fennel, celery, or anything you have at your home and has expired. You can make shapes, numbers, letters, landscapes, etc.

For more details visit:

Potatoes: <https://www.firstpalette.com/craft/potato-stamps.html>

Fruits and vegetables:

<https://www.firstpalette.com/craft/fruit-vegetable-prints.html>

- ➡ **Ingredient scavenger hunt:** hide the ingredients you need to make a recipe. You can even set a timer up if they enjoyed being challenged. Afterwards you can make the recipe together. This is a great idea for children who enjoy movement and competitive activities.

Strategies to help your child eat new foods

- ➡ **Homemade scent and spices playdough:** great idea for sensory play, where they can explore with their hands, eyes and nose. Through a familiar thing (playdough) you can start to introduce new scents and spices, allowing them some time to get comfortable with them before including them in their food.

For more details visit:

<https://craftulate.com/homemade-herb-and-spice-play-dough/>

- ➡ **Organizing ingredients by similar characteristics:** many people with autism enjoy organizing and classifying. Grab the food from your kitchen and ask your child to organize the food by common characteristics (color, size, mealtime, package, sweet/savory, raw/need cooking). You can ask them to organize them several times. This game can help children identify similarities between what they eat and new food.

If you have any questions, are interested in additional material or need any kind of support, don't hesitate to contact me.

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