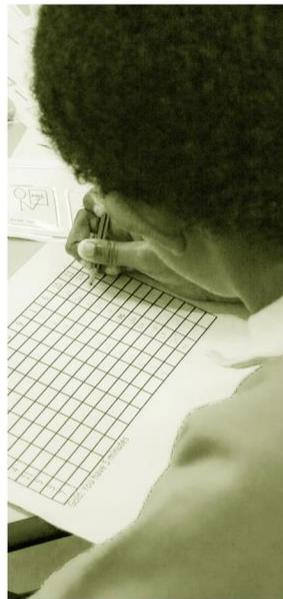


Fussy Eating and Mealtime Difficulties



A lot of children can be picky or fussy eaters. For some children this can be much more extreme, with children only eating a very small range of foods. If you feel that your child has problems you can get in touch with the therapy team at school or speak to your GP to get a better idea of where their difficulties might be.

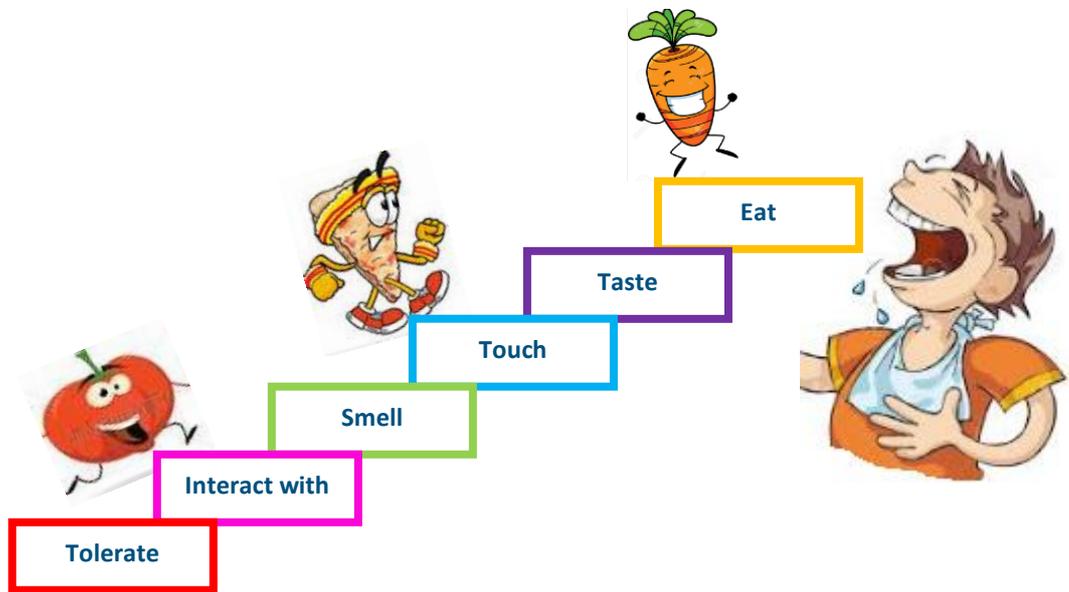
We know that one of the main reasons, at first, for children’s difficulties in eating can be sensory. Due to differences children can have in the way they experience sensory information, for example being over-sensitive or under-sensitive in one or more of their senses, they can have difficulties with eating certain foods such as crunchy foods or strong tasting foods.

Eating is a multi-sensory process involving the co-ordination of eight systems:

	<p>Sight: changes with every chew</p>	
	<p>Sound: changes with every chew (different consistency)</p>	
	<p>Touch: changes with every chew (texture is different)</p>	
	<p>Taste: changes with every chew (molecules are broken)</p>	
	<p>Smell: changes with every chew (molecules are broken)</p>	
	<p>Proprioception: changes with every chew (pressure is different)</p>	
	<p>Balance: changes with every chew (head shifts)</p>	
	<p>Interoception: sensation of movement in oesophagus changes, stretch on stomach and appetite changes</p>	

Six Steps to Eating | Hierarchy

To help children to manage any sensory difficulties they may have with eating we can support them through six big steps towards eating (broken down into lots of smaller steps) that need to be taken before we feel comfortable eating a food -



For all children, they may be at different steps in this process for different foods. Below are these big steps broken down to show progression across them towards eating. It can give you an idea where your child is with certain foods and where we are then looking for the next step.

Tolerate

This is a visual task:

- Be in the same room
- At the table with food on the other side of the table
- At the table with food halfway across the table
- At the table with food almost in front of you
- At the table with food directly in front of you

We start of gradually, we want to make sure the child knows **there is no demand** being placed on them, **no expectation that the food must be eaten.**

Interact with

This involves vestibular, proprioceptive and interoception systems. **Make this fun:**

- Helps with preparation/set up with food (without having to touch with bare skin)
- Uses utensils/container to stir/pour food/drink into other containers
- Uses utensils/container to serve self-directly
- Touches through/with napkin or see-through bag
- Touches with another, preferred food

**Smell**

- Have smell in the room
- Have smell at the table
- Smell almost in front of the child
- Child leans down towards or picks up food to smell it

Touch

This is going to get messy, but that is the aim, play with food, explore and experience it:

- Finger tips/pads
- Whole hand
- *Chest, shoulder*
- *Top of head*
- *Chin, cheek*
- *Nose, underneath nose*
- Lips
- Teeth
- Tip of tongue, full tongue



**Doesn't have to
experience this, but
why not!**

**Taste**

Children can sometimes seem to plateau here so moving on from there can take a lot of time!

- Licks lips, tongue licks food
- Bites off pieces and spits out immediately
- Bites pieces and holds in mouth for a couple of seconds and then spits out
- Bites pieces, chews a couple of times then spits out

Spitting is a natural phase in the process of learning to eat. Children need to feel comfortable that they can food out if they want!

Eat

- Chews, partially swallows
- Chews, swallows with drink
- Chews and swallows independently

Eating at home

Improving your child's eating at home involves integrating your child's sensory systems alongside the steps to eating hierarchy.

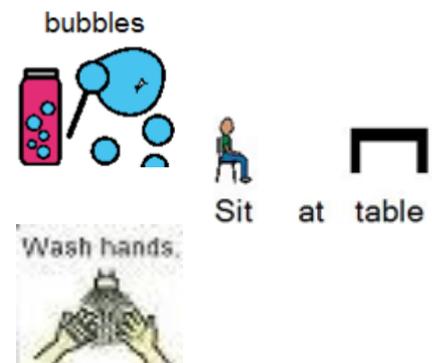
Key ideas;

- Sensory preparation
- Gradual Desensitisation
- Routine offering of food
- Encouragement through the 6 steps to eating hierarchy
- Child-led approach in which there is **no pressure** to interact with non-preferred foods

Strategies:

1. Choose a family meal in the day at which non-preferred foods can be offered
2. Establish a consistent meal routine
 - a. Start with a sensory warm-up with aim to either calm or wake up their sensory system (example dance to a song; blowing bubbles)
 - b. Encourage child to independently sit at the table with family for their meal
 - c. Washing hands in the kitchen may be a good transition toward the table
3. Offer preferred foods on main plate for child
4. On a separate small side plate, offer **SMALL** portion of a non-preferred food or a family food.
 - a. If your child appears to be very aversive to a particular food, do not offer that first.
 - b. You may need to start with foods similar to their preferred foods, before moving on to other foods. For example if your child prefers white/beige coloured foods, offer a different white/beige coloured food.
5. Family should role-model the steps to eating hierarchy and encourage copying and positive interactions with the foods, **WITHOUT** forcing child to eat the food
6. When meal time is finished allow child to clear their own plate into the bin if they wish to do so, this removes the non-preferred food from sight.

To be consistent, these strategies should be applied every day to the same meal, with the same meal routine. Non-preferred foods should be offered on the side plate more than once to increase the familiarity to the food.



Hierarchy Strategies

Tolerate

1. Describe the food while it is in front of you “it feels warm and squishy”
2. You can play with the food in a creative/fun way near/in front of child
3. Your child can watch food preparation *because you are making it engaging and interesting*
4. Food is passed in front of your child; directly in front of their face
5. Place food on a napkin or table next to your child and move it as close to them as they tolerate (without drawing attention to this, over the course of the meal)
6. Place food on edge of plate and move closer as their tolerance increases



Interact with

1. Have your child pass a see through food container/bag back and forth to you
2. Have your child serve the food (either for them or another family member) with a utensil (serving spoon for example)
3. Your child could help with food preparation using utensils, stirring, mixing, pouring etc.
4. Your child could push one food with another food (or utensil) like making a train or playing with cars
5. Your child could put one food into another (making faces, making cakes with candles, making their favourite TV character)
6. Your child could blow on food to tip it over or move along the plate/surface



Smell

1. Have your child in kitchen while food is being cooked
2. Have small 'smell pots' of certain foods available for your child to sniff
3. Have your child help prepare foods with utensils or hands
4. Peeling, cutting, stirring
5. Waving food in front of face (mimicking fans, airplanes, wiggle worms)
6. Bringing the food near the nose (make moustaches, whiskers, beards, lipstick, clown noses)
7. Model leaning down and exaggerating smelling ("Hmmm...Ahhh")



Touch

1. Building with food (making trains, steps, bridges, rainbows, letters, shapes)
2. Painting with foods (shapes, letters, pictures, faces, etc)
3. Driving foods and driving foods under other foods (peanuts make great boats and cars)
4. Inch worm up the hand, arm, shoulder, cheeks, etc (spaghetti is great for this!)
5. Driving to the cave (mouth)
6. Kissing foods, foods kissing you
7. Pretending the food is lipstick, rubbing food on lips
8. Flicking food onto the plate, into a bowl
9. Serving yourself with your hands (maybe initially with gloves on)
10. Throwing away left over food from the table using their hands
11. Making food into objects you can wear (earrings, glasses, necklace, bows in hair, rings, etc)
12. Smashing, crunching, breaking, ripping, tearing with hands
13. Using cookie cutters
14. Tapping food on your teeth
15. Balancing food on your nose
16. Hanging food from lower lip
17. Holding food on/above your upper lip with no hands
18. Sliding down the slide/ski slope (= your nose)
19. Sticking the food to parts of the body (forehead, cheek, hand, nose, chin)



Taste

1. Being a puppy with a bone
2. Holding food in teeth, “Look no hands!”
3. Kissing food
4. Driving into mouth
5. Blowing/spitting out of mouth
6. Hold in teeth then push out with tongue
7. Licking (“make it wet, like a puppy does”, lick it like an ice-cream cone)
8. Listen to the noises it makes when biting/crunching
9. Imitate brushing teeth with food
10. Making a popping noise pulling foods out of mouth
11. Exaggerated chewing with noise and head movement
12. Licking food from fingers
13. Hold bite of food in back teeth, spit out
14. Bite off small pieces, then spit out quickly
15. Touch food to tip of tongue fast
16. Playing peek-a-boo on tongue
17. Counting chews
18. “1, 2, 3” everyone licks, bites etc.



10 Top Tips for 'fussy eaters'

Supporting children who are finding eating tricky can be very frustrating for parents. When eating becomes a battle of wills, parents cannot win by forcing their children to eat, so we need to go at our child's pace and explore ways of gradually getting them more comfortable with eating. It will be a slow process and will seem on some days that things might even be getting worse. Try to stick with your routine, help children to work through the six steps. Things will often not go smoothly, this is normal! Gradually, **very** gradually, your child will take small steps to being more comfortable eating a wider range of foods.

1. Have a consistent routine around mealtimes. When things are more predictable it reduces stress
2. Have a low arousal, calm environment (no screens or distractions)
3. Try to have all the family eating the same food, so parents/siblings can model eating
4. Keep things fun and keep language positive, focussing on praise for trying
5. Go at your child's pace, reduce pressure to 'eat, eat'
6. Limit snacking in between meals, especially just before meals
7. Try to keep mealtimes short (under 30 minutes)
8. Promote children feeding themselves
9. Start by using very small portions of non-preferred food to limit so it does not overwhelm
10. Try to keep food at the table (if they can tolerate it) even if your child does not eat it

More information and support;

If you would like further support for your child with their sensory or eating difficulties, please speak to your child's class or therapy team.

Therapy Office phone: 0207 6192242