

Resistant Eaters

This resource contains information to help your child enjoy food.
If you need any further information please contact your therapist.



therapyfocus

HELPING CHILDREN GROW

My therapist is:

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Resistant Eaters

**If your child is a resistant eater, it is not your fault!
And it's not their fault either.**

For most of us, food gives pleasure. It is appealing because it looks, smells and tastes good. Food is often associated with good times spent sharing meals with our family and friends, so it can be difficult to understand why food is not appealing to your child.

For some children, food may not look appetizing; it may smell offensive or it may feel slimy, lumpy or strange, both in their hands and in their mouth. The sights, smells, and feeling of food might even make them feel sick. Some children may even react with fear – to them, food is scary and strange.

The social aspect of mealtimes can also be very overwhelming. Sitting down at the dinner table to share a meal with others may be noisy, confusing and distracting. Others simply do not feel hungry in the way that most people do, and so are not motivated to eat.

Children experiencing these difficulties are known as 'resistant eaters'.



Why won't my child eat?

Resistant eating can be caused by a range of factors.

- It might be related to how your child's body interprets information from their senses.
- It might be that your child has become used to a particular routine at mealtimes, and needs help to adjust to new routines.
- It might be that your child has had an unpleasant experience with food in the past and is now worried about trying new foods.

How to encourage eating

These tips are based on the experience of many parents and are basic things to keep in mind when offering food to your child.

Every child is an individual – what works for someone else’s child may not necessarily work for your child.

If your child has swallowing difficulties always check with a speech pathologist before changing the consistency or texture of their food to ensure that the food remains safe for them to swallow.

Keep a record of the strategies that you have tried and discuss them with your therapist. They can help you build on the successful strategies and develop new strategies to try.

- **Set a good example for your child.** Eat a wide variety of food in front of your child.
- **Let your child know that you enjoy eating a range of foods.** Try not to say negative things about food you don’t like.
- **Offer ‘kid size’ meals.** Smaller meals, with healthy snacks in between, are easier than three big meals a day.
- **Offer your child their meals and snacks at regular times so they get into a routine.**
- **Keep offering new foods even if your child refuses them at first.** Children need to see foods several times before they look ‘familiar’. Becoming familiar with a certain type of food may encourage your child to try it.
- **Offer drinks with meals and snacks.** Don’t allow your child to fill up on drinks in between eating times.
- **Don’t ‘bribe’ your child to eat.** By promising them their favourite foods as a reward for trying new foods your child may end up hating the new food.
- **Use substitutes if your child does not like a particular food.** If they won’t drink milk, buy yoghurt or cheese. If they don’t like vegetables offer plenty of fruit.
- **Keep calm at mealtimes.** Try not to show your child that you are feeling frustrated or angry as this could make the problem worse.
- **Blend a little of the new food into one of your child’s favourite foods.**
- **Make sure any medical problems that interfere with your child’s eating are treated.** These problems could include teething, a sore throat, blocked nose, or upset tummy.
- **Talk to a dietician if you would like advice about your child’s diet.**

This information has been adapted from the Nutrition Australia website. For further information visit www.nutritionaustralia.org.

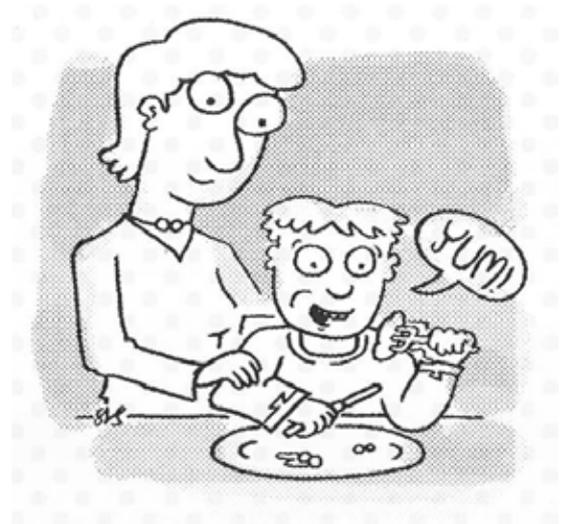
Making food fun

Children may be more willing to try new foods if food does not seem such a scary or strange thing to them.

Encouraging children to participate in fun food related activities can be a good way to increase their acceptance of food. Be aware that this can take time. Try not to pressure your child to participate in any of the activities, or force your child to try any of the foods that are included in the activities. Simply offer them the choice to participate, and to try the food.

Fun food activities to try with your child include:

- **Menu planning.** Encourage your child to help you decide which meals your family will have for the coming week by looking through recipe books.
- **Involve your child in shopping for foods.** Talk to them about the products you are going to buy, and involve them in making decisions about which foods to purchase.
- **Involve your child in preparing the family's meals and snacks.** They can be given simple chores to do, such as buttering toast, scooping the icecream, breaking the eggs, and so on.
- **Start a veggie patch.** Involve your child in caring for the plants as they grow, and getting the foods ready to be served; picking, washing, and cutting up.
- **Take your child on food related excursions.** Places to visit could include farms, markets, bakeries, butchers and supermarkets. Activities can be done following the excursion such as sampling the foods at the particular place visited and a discussion of the importance of the particular type of food.
- **Try outdoor eating activities such as picnics or cooking over a camp fire.**
- **Use food during play times such as 'tea parties' to help your child associate food with fun.**
- **Present food in a fun or exciting way.** Make a funny face out of the food on the plate; you could use two cherry tomatoes for eyes and half a banana for a mouth.
- **Set up a star chart system.** Put a star on this chart every time your child tries a new food. When the chart is full, the can receive a non-food award such as going to the park.
- **Try to make meals fun and relaxing for your child.** For example, make up fun songs or rhymes about the new foods you would like your child to try.



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Food Play

Children who are resistant eaters often benefit from exposure to food at times and in ways that are unrelated to mealtimes and eating.

Food play may help your child learn to accept the sight, smell, feel and mere presence of food in ways that are undemanding and non-threatening. Some children who are resistant eaters also have other sensory issues. For example, they may not enjoy getting their hands messy. These fun food activities can be divided into those which are more demanding or less demanding in terms of tactile load (how 'messy' the play is or how much actual contact with the food is required).

Activities which are less demanding in terms of tactile load;

- **“No-Mess Messy Play”:** Put different liquid ice-cream toppings into small zip lock plastic bags. Encourage your child to squeeze and ‘squish’ the bags so that the toppings move to different parts of the bag. The bags can be refrigerated and used over a few days.
- **Jelly Powder Patterns:** Show your child how to create patterns with glue stick on paper. Put a pile of jelly powder in the middle of the paper and blow it with a straw so that it spreads over the paper. The jelly powder will adhere to the glue, making an interesting picture.
- **Pea Soccer:** Make goals on either end of a large baking tray using toothpicks and fruit/vegetables as mentioned in the above activity. Using straws, try to blow a pea “soccer ball” into the opposite goal.
- **Smells:** Put a variety of herbs and spices in separate jars so the children can smell each one e.g. Herbs: sage, rosemary, thyme, parsley, basil, oregano, dill, spearmint. Spices: cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, cloves, turmeric, paprika.
- **Food Music:** Fill jars or bottles with beans or rice and secure the lid. These can be used as castanets to make different sounds. Also jars can be filled with different amounts of liquid and when hit with a spoon or stick, will make different pitch sounds.

Activities which are more demanding in terms of tactile load;

- **Making Jewellery:** Thread pasta tubes, fruit loops, cheezels or any other appropriate food onto a piece of string. Make necklaces, bracelets, belts and headbands which your child can wear.
- **Food Paintings:** Use foods of different textures to make pictures. Paint different shaped pasta pieces and when they have dried, glue them onto paper. Discuss with your child what colour to paint the different shapes as they may lend themselves to different parts of the picture, e.g. bow-shaped pieces may be butterflies, etc.
- **Food Sculptures:** Cut up fruits and vegetables, e.g. carrots, potatoes, cucumbers, apples, etc. into different shapes. Use peas, beans and other foods of various shapes. Show your child how to create sculptures by joining the pieces together with toothpicks.

You could make a food man by using a grape for a head, a rectangular piece of potato for a body, bits of carrot for feet and some apple for the hands. You could make animals, monsters, aliens, space ships or whatever your child’s imagination produces.

Food Play

- **Teddy Bears Picnic:** Let your child choose her favourite teddies and dolls. Arrange them on a picnic mat and have a pretend picnic using small pieces of food. You could prepare the food beforehand e.g. tiny sandwiches, biscuits broken into appropriate sized pieces, fruit or vegetables that your child has helped to cut up.
- **Rice Mountains Car Track:** Empty some rice onto a large baking tray and encourage your child to use their hands to create hills and mountains with roads running between them. Cut some carrots or potatoes into the shape of cars and drive them around the track. You can use other food to create different scenery, e.g., broccoli bushes, pretzel stick fences etc
- **Potato Printing:** Use potatoes cut into different shapes. Apples, carrots and cucumber can also be used etc Dip these into different colour paints and press onto paper to make interesting pictures. Also try cutting designs into the food (such as a cross, circle, square or triangle), paint the shapes with brightly coloured paint and press the food onto paper to create beautiful pictures.
- **Peanut Butter Play Dough** (not for children who are allergic to peanuts!)
Ingredients:
1 cup peanut butter
1 cup honey
2 cups powdered milk (use just the powder)

Directions: Mix ingredients together, using varying amounts of dry milk for desired consistencies. Knead it with fingers, forming into desired shapes, adding other foods like M&M's or peanuts for eyes, mouths, etc. Great fun!

Storage: When not using, MUST be stored in the fridge in an airtight container.
- **Finger Painting with Chocolate Pudding:** This is a great outside activity as it may become a little messy! Make up the pudding according to the directions on the packet. Show your child how to paint on a large sheet of paper using his fingers which have been dipped in the pudding. Making handprints in different patterns or to make pictures e.g. a butterfly is also fun. You don't need to limit yourself to chocolate either – vanilla, blueberry and strawberry can be used to make really colourful pictures. Encourage friends and other family members to join in, making it a really positive experience for your child.
- **Jelly Treasure Hunt:** Make up a packet of jelly according to the directions on the packet. Before the jelly sets, put some small objects into the jelly e.g. a toy car, a plastic dinosaur etc. When the jelly is set, take turns with your child to feel and find buried treasure.

These are all activities that the whole family can be part of. Involving others helps to focus the attention away from the child who is the resistant eater and away from the fact that food is being used in the games. Other children may lick their food covered fingers or sample some of the food being used, providing an unobtrusive model of being relaxed and happy around food.

This information has been adapted from the Nutrition Australia website. For more information visit www.nutritionaustralia.org.au

Exploding food myths

In Australian society, many people have the same ideas or ‘rules’ about eating. However, many of these ideas are myths – they are not true!

They are also not helpful when it comes to encouraging children who are resistant eaters to try more foods. You may have come across the following ‘food myths.’ It is best not to pay attention to these ideas if your child is a resistant eater.

Don’t play with your food - just eat it

Children who are resistant eaters need opportunities to play with their food. Playing with food helps children to get used to new textures and colours – giving their senses new and interesting stimulation.

You must clear your plate

It is important that children are given the opportunity to decide when they are full and have had enough to eat. This helps to stop children feeling ‘pressured’ to eat, which can increase their resistance to eating.

They’ll grow out of it

Although fussy eating is common in the preschool years, children who are resistant eaters should not be left to ‘grow out of it’. Once a child has been a resistant eater for a number of years, change can be very difficult and slow. The earlier you start to work with resistant eaters the better.

Certain foods are for certain meals and can’t be eaten at other times

This is not true for all children– some children who are resistant eaters do not associate the feelings in their stomach with hunger and needing food.

Junk food should not be eaten

Many people are concerned when their child prefers to eat junk foods. Continue to move towards a more varied and nutritious diet for your child as much as you can. However, if your child is a resistant eater and their diet is very limited, it may be best not to cut out preferred junk foods until you have more nutritious replacements that your child will eat.

If children are hungry enough they’ll eat

This is not true for all children– some children who are resistant eaters do not associate the feelings in their stomach with hunger and needing food.

Parents are responsible for getting their kids to eat

It is important that children are given the opportunity to decide when they are full and have had enough to eat. This helps to stop children feeling ‘pressured’ to eat, which can increase their resistance to eating.

Children who are resistant eaters will be unhealthy

A balanced diet is best for healthy development, strong immune systems and the ability to learn. However some resistant eaters with very limited diets continue to grow and develop even though they have a limited diet.

Encouraging Fruit & Veg

Any parent will tell you that encouraging children to eat fruit and vegetables can be a challenge, but eating a wide range of fruit and vegetables is important to ensure a healthy, nutritious diet.

The Dietitian's Association of Australia recommends the following creative strategies to encourage children to eat more fruit and vegetables:

- Add well blended fresh fruit to milk to make a delicious smoothie. Soft fruits such as bananas, melons and strawberries work well. You can add flavours that your child enjoys to make the smoothie more appealing. For example, you could try adding honey, or flavoured essences or syrups. This makes a delicious, healthy 'milk shake.'
- Freezing pureed fresh fruit by itself or mixed with a little smooth vanilla yoghurt can make a healthy substitute for 'icecream.' Again, you can try adding additional flavours to enhance the appeal of this snack.
- Finely grate vegetables and add these to your pasta sauces or homemade hamburger patties.
- Add finely grated vegetables such as carrot and zucchini to muffins and cakes.

Taking part in fun activities that are related to fruit and vegetables can help to make the idea of eating these foods more appealing to your child.

Try these activities:

- Take the children to the local fruit and vegetables markets and let them choose which foods your family will enjoy for the week.
- Encourage children to participate in preparing and cooking fruit and vegetables for family meals.
- Grow a fruit and vegetable garden if you have the space. Encourage the children to help you look after the plants as they grow. Then encourage them to pick the fruit and vegetables with you, so that the whole family can enjoy these foods straight from the garden.
- Experimenting with the types of fruit and vegetables that you offer, and the way that you serve them, can help to expand your child's intake of fruit and vegetables.

Above all, it is important that you provide a good role model for your child by eating lots of healthy fruit and vegetables yourself. Good luck with these ideas!

If you would like more suggestions please talk to your Therapy Focus clinician, or to a registered practicing dietitian.

This information has been adapted from the website of the Dietitian's Association of Australia. Please refer to <http://www.daa.asn.au/> for more ideas.

Mealtime Behaviour

Sometimes the behaviour of resistant eaters may cause problems for other members of the family resulting in family mealtimes being a frustrating experience for everyone involved.

There are a number of things that you can do to help if your child's behaviour is difficult to manage at mealtimes. Use the tips and advice below to improve your child's behaviour at mealtimes.

Setting a mealtime routine

Having a mealtime routine will help you set your child up for success!

A good, regular routine can help your child feel more settled when eating and can encourage more acceptable behaviour at mealtimes. Having a set routine makes mealtimes more familiar and more comfortable for your child and helps your child to learn when they are expected to do and eat .

Eat meals and snacks at the same time each day

By offering your child meals and snacks at the same time each day, your child will start to learn that there are regular, set times in the day when they are expected to eat.

Make sure that mealtimes do not last longer than 30 minutes. To help develop a routine your child must learn that there is a time limit for mealtimes. Your child may not enjoy mealtimes, so it may be comforting for them to know that mealtimes only last for a short period of time. This can help to improve their behaviour at mealtimes as well.

Get ready for meals in the same way each day

Develop a routine around how you and your child get ready for meals. For example, ask your child to wash their hands and set the table before each meal. This will alert them to the fact that it is time to get ready for eating.

Sit at the table

Always encourage your child to eat their meals in a set place – the dining table. This helps them to understand that when they come to the table, they are expected to eat. Sitting at the table also helps to develop your child's posture, and the physical skills that are needed for eating. Make sure that you always have the utensils that your child needs for eating available to them. If they require any special equipment for eating make sure this is on hand.

Mealtime rules

Set a few simple mealtime rules and the consequences of breaking these rules. For example, tell your child that if they leave the table before the end of the meal, you will bring them back to the table and ask them to sit down again.

Teaching your child the routine.

Using visual supports can be useful to teach your child about their mealtime routine and your family's mealtime rules. Talk to a Therapy Focus therapist about how to set up an appropriate visual support system for your child.

Mealtime Behaviour

Responding to unacceptable behaviour

It is important to teach your child the types of behaviour you want them to use at mealtimes, and the types of behaviour you do not want them to use. To help with this:

- Keep the atmosphere at mealtimes peaceful and organised.
- Try to communicate with your child in a quiet and calm manner, even though their behaviour may be frustrating.
- If your child breaks a mealtime rule, follow through with the consequences .
- Focus on the positive – make positive comments about the food and your child’s attempts at eating .
- Don’t criticise your child. Never coerce them or force them to eat as this can increase their anxiety and their resistance to eating.
- Calmly remove any food that is thrown or that is left on the plate after 30 minutes have gone by.
- Calmly remove your child from the table if they have a tantrum. Encourage them to return to the table to continue their meal when they have calmed down.

Remember each child is an individual!

Some of these strategies may work well for your child, while others may be less helpful. Keep a record of the strategies you have tried with your child and discuss these with a Therapy Focus clinician.



Mealtime Environment

If your child is a resistant eater, there are a number of factors that may contribute to their reluctance to participate in mealtimes with the family.

One of these may be a mealtime environment that is overwhelming or distracting. This is because children with disabilities are often more sensitive to noises and distractions in their environment. Creating an environment that will support your child to have success at mealtimes is very important.

It is difficult to enjoy food when the environment does not feel relaxing.

Making simple changes to the mealtime environment may encourage your child to take part in meals with the family and to try more foods.

Create a peaceful and organised atmosphere

Mealtimes should be fun and enjoyable for all members of the family. Part of this is making sure that the atmosphere is peaceful and your child does not feel pressured to eat.

Use a calm, quiet voice when talking to your child at mealtimes. Encourage your child, but don't get angry or coerce them to eat. This may make them feel stressed or anxious, and they will be less willing to join in at mealtimes.

Always praise your child when they behave well at mealtimes or try new foods.

Being organised is also very important. Make the utensils that your child needs for eating available to them at all times. If they require any special equipment for eating make sure this is on hand.

Sit at the table

Always encourage your child to eat their meals in a set place – the dining table. This helps them to understand that when they come to the table, they are expected to eat. Sitting at the table also helps to develop your child's posture, and the physical skills that are needed for eating.

Reduce distractions

Many children can concentrate better when the environment at mealtimes is not distracting. Any favourite toys or games should be kept well out of sight when your child is eating.

Most children concentrate best if it is quiet when they are eating, so switch the television or radio off. However, some children benefit from soft, soothing music (such as classical music) playing softly in the background.

You will need to experiment to see what works best for your child. Try starting with a quiet environment and see if this works first.

Mealtime Environment

Eat together and eat the same food

It is important that the whole family eats together. This helps to create a sense of familiarity for your child. Other members of the family also have the opportunity to demonstrate the types of behaviour you would like your child to use at mealtimes. It is important that all members of the family eat the same food, and show how much they enjoy trying new foods. They can do this by making lots of positive comments about the food.

Give your child a sense of control

As the parent, you are in charge at mealtimes. However giving your child a sense of control over small aspects of the meal encourages them to become more independent.

Try serving food on plates in the centre of the table. Serve everyone some of the food from each dish, and encourage your child to take more of the foods that they like. Encourage them to feed themselves where possible. Ask them to tell you what sort of foods they like to eat and when they feel full. This is an important part of responding to your child's needs at mealtimes. A sense of independence and control can help to make mealtimes non-threatening and more enjoyable for your child.

Food Aversion

Some children who are resistant eaters become anxious when offered food, these children may have had negative experiences with food or eating and over time these memories may make the thought of eating seem scary or strange. Health professionals sometimes call this ‘food aversion’.

There are some children who are resistant eaters and become anxious when offered food. They may become worried, suspicious, or even frightened when encouraged to try new foods. These children may have had negative experiences with food or eating when they were very young and over time these memories may develop what Health professionals sometimes call ‘food aversion’.

The child develops an ‘aversion’ (a strong dislike) to food and so begins to avoid eating. If the child continues to avoid food over time their diet can become very restricted. They may only eat a very small variety of foods, or they may be highly reluctant to eat anything at all.

Some types of early experiences that may lead to a child developing an aversion to food include:

- Swallowing difficulty , which can cause choking, gagging, severe coughing or pain when swallowing.
- Non oral feeding. Nasogastric tubes can irritate the nose and throat, making swallowing more of an effort or painful. Children who have feeding (PEG) tubes to their stomach may not be used to the sensation of food in their mouth and throat, meaning that swallowing takes more concentration and effort.
- Food allergies or intolerance can cause nausea and vomiting.
- Reflux can cause nausea and pain after eating.
- Medical procedures such as medical investigations or treatments to the mouth, throat and face can make the thought of any sensation or touching in this area very unpleasant. This includes intubation, which some children require to help them breathe. Intubation can irritate and inflame the insides of the mouth and throat.

If you think that your child may have an aversion to food, there are a number of things you can do to help. Some children may benefit from facial exercises that help them become less sensitive to touch around their mouth and face. Ask your child’s Therapy Focus therapist about these exercises.

If your child will tolerate touching around their mouth and face and you would like to introduce new foods, there are 3 main steps to follow. These are described in the ‘3 Step Plan’. Your Therapy Focus therapist can help you to implement the 3 Step Plan. They can also suggest appropriate activities to try with your child at each step of the plan.

Food Aversion

The 3 Step Plan

The aim of this plan is to make food seem more acceptable, and over time, more appealing to your child. The plan involves encouraging your child to spend time doing enjoyable activities that involve food, without any pressure to eat. These fun activities should be carried out at times other than mealtimes. Some children may benefit from being taught relaxation techniques as you follow the plan with them, which may help to reduce their anxiety.

Step 1. Acceptance

Gradually encourage your child to tolerate being around new foods, or the foods they dislike. Activities that may help with this include food preparation activities such as food shopping and cooking. Food related excursions such as visiting food markets, going to restaurants, and enjoying family picnics together may also be helpful. At this stage they are not expected to try eating these foods.

Step 2. Experiencing food through touch, smell and eventually...taste

The next step involves encouraging your child to start exploring and experiencing food through their senses. Begin by encouraging your child to touch the new or disliked foods. Choose one or two foods at a time. To help with success, choose foods that are similar in texture and appearance to the foods they like.

As you would eventually like your child to try tasting the food, also try to choose foods that taste naturally sweet and 'child-friendly'. Turning touching food into a game can be helpful. Try 'pass the parcel' with food items, making a food 'feely box', paint and craft activities with food, and food 'show and tell.' When your child is comfortable with touching the food gradually encourage them to smell each food.

Playing a game such as 'Guess the Food Smell' can make this more enjoyable for your child. The final stage involves encouraging your child to taste the food. Start by gradually encouraging your child to lick the food, then to hold a small bite on their tongue, and then to taste the food. Allow them to spit the food out at first but reduce this over time. Offer your child water in between tastes. It may take many attempts before your child is willing to try tasting the food.

Step 3. Introducing foods at mealtimes

The next step is introducing the new or disliked foods at mealtimes. Offer your child's preferred and non – preferred foods together. It is often best to make sure these foods are not touching however. At first you just want your child to tolerate having the food on their plate. Over time, you can then encourage them to smell, and to try the foods. Your child may take some time to adjust to the foods being included with family meals. It is important to give them the time they need at each stage of the process.

Increasing Appetite

Some children who are resistant eaters do not experience hunger in the same way that other people do. These children may have little appetite, or no appetite at all. They may never feel hungry, or they may not associate the 'empty' feeling in their stomach with being hungry and needing to eat.

Because these children have a reduced appetite, they are not motivated to eat. Mealtimes can become a real battle when you want your child to eat and they have no motivation to do so.

Gently encouraging your child to eat is as important as good nutrition is essential to help your child grow, develop and learn. But it is also very important that you do not pressure your child to eat. Never force feed your child. This can be very distressing for children, and can increase their resistance to eating. Maintaining a peaceful and calm atmosphere at mealtimes is a good starting point.

The strategies listed below can help to encourage children with a reduced appetite to eat. Try these strategies with the support of your Therapy Focus therapist.

- Encourage your child to participate in some light exercise before meals. Exercise can help to increase their appetite. Outdoor exercise may be most helpful, as many people believe that fresh air stimulates appetite.
- Children need smaller amounts of food than adults. Offer your child small 'kid sized' meals and offer them seconds if they want them. A large plate of food can seem overwhelming if your child is not feeling hungry in between meals, offer them small easy to eat healthy snacks.
- Offer food at times when your child seems to have more of an appetite. For many children this is at breakfast time or early in the morning. After a big sleep children can often feel more rested and this can make them feel more hungry.
- If your child never seems to be hungry, schedule in regular times for meals and snacks. Ensure you keep to this schedule. This will help your child to develop a routine of eating, rather than relying on their appetite.
- Only offer your child drinks of milk and water. Other drinks such as juices and soft drinks can fill them up and reduce their appetite for food.
- When your child is eating, encourage them to chew slowly and take breaks when they need to.
- Encourage your child to rest after meals and snacks to aid their digestion.

Always remember to consult a qualified dietitian if you are concerned about your child's diet or nutrition. They will be able to provide advice on your child's dietary needs. They can also suggest ways you can increase your child's intake of calories and nutrients without having to offer them larger amounts of food. These strategies might include giving your child a multi-vitamin, or special nutritional supplement drinks. Other useful people to talk to if you are worried about your child's diet or health are your family doctor and/or child health nurse.

Oral Defensiveness

Oral Defensiveness is an aversive response to touch sensations in and around the mouth that may cause extreme sensory, emotional and behavioural responses when eating.

Treatment Principles

- In all instances, approach oral defensiveness in a fun and playful way.
- Rapport must be well established with the child.
- Allow the child to be an active participant in therapy as much as possible.
- Take turns at playing the games with the child or include siblings.
- Slow and steady wins the race.
- Establish a routine - Performing the routine the same way in each session helps a child to know the expectations.
- Take it one step at a time - For severely orally aversive children you may not even be able to start near their mouth. Work your way from the outer perimeter of the face in toward the mouth, then the outside of the mouth, and gradually work your way into the mouth
- Reinforce all positive responses. Give verbal praise and tangible reinforcement

Therapy is directed toward reducing the sensory problems specifically related to food. However, the general strategy is to reduce the overall defensiveness of the sensory systems, not just the mouth. Many of the strategies used in Sensory Integration programs are effective. These include use of vestibular input (movement through space), deep-pressure touch, and proprioceptive input through the joints. Rhythmical, organizing music and sound can also influence the auditory-vestibular system. They can be implemented the family routine across the day and in preparation for meals.

Games and Activities to de-sensitize the Oral Space and improve oral motor control (muscle tone)

Encourage the child to explore their mouth with their own hands. If tolerated, rub the inside of their mouth with your fingertips (parent/therapist - with gloves)

Introduce oral toys into play. Examples include, rubber toys, teething rings (different temperatures and textures). You can also buy teething rings that vibrate when the child bites on them.

Rub the gums and oral area with a warm washcloth using firm pressure. Firm rubbing and deep pressure generally calm and desensitize and therefore increase tolerance to touch sensations. You can buy a baby toothbrush set from a pharmacy with different sized and textured tips. Apply pressure with washcloth or toothbrush tip firstly to the upper palate of the mouth and gradually (depending on the child's response) apply to the lips, cheeks, gums and tongue.

Oral Defensiveness

Sucking activities promote oral motor development. Try sucking lollypops, drinking through a straw (try different types of straws, start narrow and short and grade to thicker and longer.) Try sucking pureed fruit through a straw.

Gradually introduce small amounts of food into activities. For example, dipping a lollypop into pureed fruit, dipping rubber toys or toothbrush into juice. Help the child be more comfortable with hands/ toys/ foods being in or near their mouth.

Adapting and Introducing New Food

Prepare the child adequately prior to meals. Make the environment as stress-free as possible. You may want to turn lights lower than usual, minimize loud or distracting noises, maybe use a background sound of soft music. You may find that if you spend a few minutes before the feeding massaging your child so he/she will be more relaxed at feeding time.

Consider other factors such as: Does your child need a puppet/favorite character to help them model eating? Would it help to place a mirror in front of them to see where their mouth is? Is the seating comfortable and positioning appropriate so that they do not slip out or slump?

It is important to de-sensitize the mouth and oral space prior to meal times. Rubbing inside the mouth with a warm wash cloth along with a variety of blowing and sucking games can help to prepare the child for eating and assist them in tolerating textures.

Offer the child bland-tasting foods. Unwanted taste can be an assault on the senses of an orally defensive child. While some orally defensive children may develop a preference for foods that are slightly sweet, or foods with a particular flavor, they will most likely not want a wide variety of different tastes and they will not want foods with more powerful flavors.

Let him play with the food (even if he throws it) as much as possible because feeling the textures on his hands may help him.

Let them play with the food as much as possible. Make food fun. If they throw the food, instead have them kiss it or bite it goodbye into an "all done bowl." Always offer the food you are eating for them to explore. Talk about it with them, e.g. "It's soft, hot, green, etc."

Put foods such as peanut butter on his upper lip and have him lick it off...so he could learn to use his tongue to locate the food.

Try mixing foods that the child will eat with very small amounts of a new food.

The child is seated and encouraged to touch the food or utensils (if this is possible). Then the feeder touches the lips or face to indicate that the food is on the way. A cue such as squeezing the hand, or saying "here's another bite", could be given before each spoonful. As the meal continues, a regular rhythm of food presentation may provide the necessary cues. If the routine is followed at each meal, the child can anticipate the arrival of the food and is not startled when it reaches the mouth.

Oral Defensiveness

Use a spoon that is coated with rubber or vinyl if the child tends to bite on the spoon or has problems with taste or temperature. The coating protects the teeth and reduces the intensity of taste and temperature sensations.

Use fruit, mashed potatoes, dehydrated cereal, fruit or vegetable flakes, gelatin, arrow root powder, or a commercial thickener to thicken liquid if the child has trouble drinking. When the liquid is thicker (milkshake consistency), you have better control of a small amount. The liquid doesn't move as quickly so the child has better control. Thin liquid (like milk and juice) often splashes into the airway if the child has swallowing problems.

Add enough moisture to foods to ensure they are manageable in the mouth.

Use utensils that are consistent and tolerated by the child.

Food is better tolerated on the front or middle of the tongue rather than the back.

Provide immediate, specific positive praise for attempts at trying new foods. They may be rewarded with a spoonful of a favourite food or a sticker for a star chart. After eating, praise the child for whatever success they had.

Link new foods to those already in the child's diet. Describe how they are similar e.g. "same temperature" "same crunchiness" "same hardness"

Progress from smooth/pureed through to coarse/chewy then eventually solid/hard foods.

During eating: Do not present all foods at once. Instead, present them one at a time. When your child gestures or says that they are all done with that food, clear all of it away from the table, clean hands and mouth with by gently dabbing a wash cloth before going onto the next food.

Maintain a fun and playful atmosphere during meal times.

References and Useful Websites

- Case-Smith et al (1996) Occupational Therapy for Children. Mosby: Missouri.
- www.childrensdisabilities.info/feeding/
- http://www.comeunity.com/disability/sensory_integration/activities-oral.html
- <http://www.widesmiles.org/cleftlinks/WS-370.html>
- <http://www.new-vis.com/fym/papers/p-feed4.htm>
- http://childrenshosprichmond.org/professionals/articles/strategies_for_treating.htm
- www.child.gov.ab.ca/...health/Nutrition
- http://faculty.olin.edu/~jcrisman/Service/KWTWebNews/Therapies/sensory_integration.htm
- <http://nutritionforkids.com>
- www.autismbookshop.com have some useful oral motor toys

Developed by Sarah Applin (Occupational Therapist), 2004

Sensory Based Feeding Difficulties

Some children have sensory difficulties that make eating and mealtimes seem unpleasant to them. This is often the case for children who are resistant eaters.

Most people find eating pleasurable. But it may not be appealing to children who have 'sensory based' eating difficulties. This is because their bodies process information from their senses in a different way to other people. These 'mixed up' messages from their senses can make eating seem unsettling or even frightening.

When children have sensory based eating difficulties the thought of trying new foods can seem very threatening to them. This can mean that they will only eat a small range of foods.

- We might think food looks delicious – to children who are resistant eaters it may look unappealing, even weird.
- The smell of food may make us feel hungry – it might make a resistant eater feel sick.
- Food might even feel different to these children. It may feel lumpy, slimy or strange – both when they feel it with their hands and when they put it in their mouths.
- The sound of people chewing food (including themselves) may seem very loud and overwhelming.
- The taste of food might seem different too. Foods that we think taste fantastic might taste offensive to them.

If your child has a sensory based eating difficulty, there are a number of steps you can take to help.

1. Make sure that your child feels comfortable and safe at times when food is offered to them. Build a sense of familiarity by providing meals and snacks at regular times. Keep to a set routine at mealtimes and ensure the environment is not distracting. Be calm and comforting throughout the meal or snack time.

2. Give your child the opportunity to express their concerns about eating. It is best not to make fun of their fears or ideas about eating. The issue is very serious to your child so making light of it will not help. Reassure your child if they express concerns about eating, even if these concerns seem unreasonable.

3. If you would like to try introducing new foods to your child, do so gradually. Start by introducing foods that are similar to the ones your child will already eat. Make a list of the foods your child will eat.

Sensory Based Feeding Difficulties

See if you notice any similarities between these foods;

- You might notice that the foods look the same; they are the same colour or shape.
- They might taste the same; your child may prefer sweet, salty, or bland foods.
- The foods that your child will eat may have a similar texture, meaning that they will feel the same in your child's mouth and hands. P
- Perhaps your child prefers food that is soft, smooth and thick. Or perhaps they prefer hard, crunchy foods.
- A final thing to consider is whether your child prefers certain food groups. Do they prefer meat, fruit and vegetable, cereals, or dairy foods?

Once you have worked out the types of food that your child prefers, try offering your child one or two similar foods. For example, if your child likes mashed banana, offer smooth sweet apple puree. Make sure you only offer 1 or 2 new foods at a time so that it is not overwhelming for your child.

4. Be persistent. You may have to offer the same food many times before your child will accept it.

5. Small changes are positive! Working with sensory based eating difficulties can take time. Your child may be reluctant to accept new foods – so praise even the smallest change. Touching new foods, or even tolerating having them on their plate, are very important steps. Aim to build upon these small changes over time. If your child tolerates a new food, the next step is encouraging them to pick up the food, then place it in their mouth, then swallow a tiny amount.... and so on.

Fun with Oromotor

These activities help de-sensitize the mouth prior to meal times and develop better awareness and movement of oral muscles. Touch activities in and around the mouth along with a variety of blowing, sucking, biting and tongue movement games can help to prepare the child for eating and assist them in tolerating textures.

Face and cheeks

Sing nursery rhymes and songs such as Pat-a-cake. Do the actions to the song while touching the child's hands and arms. Gradually touch his cheeks and lips with the fingers of your/or his open hand while singing: "*Pat-a-cake, Pat-a-cake, bakers man, bake me a cake as fast as you can.*"

After a bath spend extra time rubbing your child's face and arms with a towel. Using a face washers and different textured toys on arms and then cheeks and lips is a fun way to desensitise touch and texture.

Once your child can tolerate the above activities, try to introduce new textures, e.g. soft cloths, faux fur, noodle ball, smooth hard toys, bumpy toys. Do this gradually, in the order suggested. These simple activities are surprisingly effective at encouraging muscle awareness and co-ordination in a fun non-threatening manner. For older children discuss the use of "Lanco Toys" with your therapist.

Tongue

To teach your child how to locate food around their mouth use food like honey, jam, Nutella, peanut butter, 100's&1000s etc. Place them around your child's lips and have them lick it off slowly. Put dots around different spots on their mouth and have them just lick those dots off.

When brushing teeth, encourage your child to brush across his/her tongue and the sides of the mouth.

To encourage side-to-side or lateralised chewing place your child's normal food to the side of their mouth rather than at the front of their mouth. For example, bite biscuits using side teeth rather than front teeth. If your child is spoon fed, using a plastic spoon, angle it slightly right or left so that food is placed near their side teeth not the middle of the mouth. This forces their tongue to move over to the side and scoop it up. Be careful not to place the food too far back in their mouth as these may trigger a gag reflex.

NB: Use a spoon that is coated with rubber or vinyl if the child tends to bite on the spoon or has problems with taste or temperature. The coating protects the teeth and reduces the intensity of taste and temperature sensations.

Lips

Put lipstick on your child's lips and have him/her kiss a mirror; fruit flavoured lip balms add some taste sensation to the activity. Look at what other shapes you can make with your lips eg. oo, ee, ah, m, sh. Exaggerate these movement to encourage good placement of the muscles. The mirror provides visual feedback about positioning.

Fun with Oromotor

Your speech therapist can provide pictorial cues like these below or hand cues if needed.

- Make games using the straw by blowing cotton balls, ping pong balls or similar across a table, into a container side or blow bubbles in bath water.
- Blow out candles, one at a time, but with a 'puh' sound.
- Put Nutella or peanut butter on your child's top lip, and encourage him/her to use his bottom lip to eat it.

Activities which encourage oral airflow (blowing) may assist in de-sensitizing the oral space, increase oral-muscle-tone and encourage soft palate closure . Some activities include:

Harmonicas – encourages lip spreading and provides vibration to the mouth which helps calm and coordinate muscles

Blowing bubbles, pin wheels, hooters, balloons, ball blowers, whistles, blow pens, bubble gum – encourages lip rounding

Put a straw between your child's lips (not teeth) and blow. Use lots of different shaped straws (thin or fat)

Other games include: blowing through a straw or bath into soapy water to make bubbles, blowing a ping-pong ball through a straw around an obstacle course.

Jaw

Encourage young children to explore their mouth with their own hands. If tolerated, rub the inside of their mouth with your fingertips (with gloves). This encourages them to learn to open their jaw at different heights.

Introduce oral toys into play. Examples include, rubber toys, teething rings (different temperatures and textures). You can also buy specialised mouthing toys and spoons that vibrate when the child bites on them. This teaches children to grade their jaw height depending on the size and shape of the toy. Vibration adds more sensory information.

Use strong non toxic materials such as "Thera Tubing" and paddle pop sticks to practice jaw closing and play resistance games such as tug of war. For example, your child uses their side teeth to bit down of tubing and you can play at pulling against the material. This encourages awareness of jaw strength.

Appendix 1. Food Diary

(please record every item of food & drink for ___ days)

Students Name:

Date and Time (e.g. 1.00,Dinner)	Where was food offered? (e.g. Kitchen)	Type of food and drink offered? (e.g. cheese sandwich, Kelloggs Corn Flakes)	Amount offered (e.g. half a cup)	Amount Taken	Who fed the student	How long it took (minutes)	Comments (e.g. distractors, behaviour)

Appendix 2.

Health Professionals

Eating problems potentially involve a number of biological and environmental issues. A number of health professionals can assist in assessing and treating eating problems.

Doctors can keep track of your child's weight and height and make referrals to health professionals who specialise in eating and gastrointestinal medicine.

Speech Pathologists can assess children's oral-motor, chewing and swallowing skills and provide recommendations as to what foods to present to the child, and when to present advanced textures.

Dietitians can assess children's diet and growth and assist in the treatment of some medical problems. Dietitians can also make recommendations about the amount and type of food children should eat to meet their needs.

Occupational Therapists and **Physiotherapists** can advise on different equipment to help your child become more independent and also on the most appropriate positioning for children at meals.

Psychologists can assess why children may misbehave at meal-times and provide advice as to how to organise meal-times.



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