

Autism Spectrum Disorders and Eating Difficulties

Helpful Tips for Parents and Carers



Introduction

Over 75% of children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have unusual eating behaviour. However, most do not have severe nutritional difficulties and grow well. Weight and height can be measured by your doctor to check on this.

They may eat selectively due to a desire for sameness, bland food, sensory sensitivities and difficulties coping with rules and routines around food.

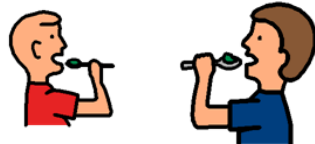
Children with ASD may get stuck on the look, taste or texture of foods. They may not accept food that is broken, over or undercooked, a different colour, marked or burnt, combined with or touching other foods. For some children with ASD if a food looks different from normal, it is a totally different food.

Research has shown that increasing exposure to foods helps increase acceptance. We have to eat a new food about 16 times before we begin to like it and for children with ASD this may be many more times.

Watch and record

Start by keeping a diary of your child's eating pattern over a period of time, e.g. three days. An example diary is included at the back of this booklet. What do they definitely eat? What types of food? When, where and with whom? How do other things such as what's going on around them, tiredness, being overly hungry, in pain, excited or anxious affect their eating? The professional who gave you this leaflet can then go over your completed diary with you, giving pointers where you can change things for the better.

Three Step Approach





Step1: Creating a good mealtime eating routine

- Have three mealtimes and two or three snack times a day, at similar times, even if your child isn't eating.
- Eat at a table, preferably in or near the food preparation area, e.g. kitchen.
- Have set places to sit at the table to reduce stress.
- Sit at the table and eat with your child so that you can model good eating and let them see you eating different foods. If you have your meal at a different time, sit with them and have a small snack.
- Keep cooking smells and sounds to a minimum at meal times, if these are challenging.
- Have meals and snacks shown on a visual timetable or checklist. This means a line of words, symbols or pictures to show what will happen. For example:




get dressed	<input type="checkbox"/>
breakfast	<input type="checkbox"/>
brush teeth	<input type="checkbox"/>
get in the car	<input type="checkbox"/>
go to school	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Stick to a predictable routine as far as is practical, as this helps to minimise anxiety.

- If a visual timetable is too much use ‘first-then’ to let your child know what comes next.

First	Then
 <p>Breakfast</p>	 <p>Watch TV</p>

- Countdown to finish activities before meals, e.g., tablet finished in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... tablet finished, or say “when the TV programme finishes, it’s time for lunch”.
- Don’t let meals or snack time last too long, no more than 20-30 minutes, even if the child has not eaten much. Tell the child clearly when food is finished and encourage them to put plates or food away.

 <p>breakfast</p>	 <p>lunch</p>	 <p>dinner</p>
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Encourage your child to sit at the table

- If your child finds it hard to sit still, start with small but manageable targets, e.g. one minute building up to realistic goals, such as, sitting for five minutes. An egg-timer, oven-timer or setting an alarm can be a useful way of showing the child how long they need to sit for.
- Specific and immediate praise will encourage your child to repeat the behaviour next time, for example, you could say **'good sitting!'**
- Try removing their plate from them calmly if they try to leave the table with it, prompt them to return and then praise them for returning to the table and sitting and eating well.
- Provide a movement break by allowing your child permission to leave the table to complete an errand and then return, such as getting the tomato sauce.
- Ensure your child has postural stability with a seat that supports their back and includes a foot rest if their feet do not touch the floor; otherwise they might not feel balanced or may slide off their chair.

Helping your child understand mealtimes

- Don't have too much chat at mealtimes. Keep language simple and focussed on what is happening.
- Reduce distractions, put games, TVs or tablets away to clearly separate meal times from play time. If this seems too difficult reduce the number of toys your child has available to them or reduce the time on the tablet at meals.
- Try and involve your child in the food preparation where appropriate, e.g. washing an apple or getting a plate from the cupboard.
- It is important that your child understands what food is and what we expect them to do related to eating and mealtimes.
- Social stories (www.carolgraysocialstories.com) are a useful way of providing this information to your child and aid their understanding of why they need to change a behaviour or try something new.
- Social stories are particularly useful for helping your child understand social situations and rules, and can be used to explain why we eat and the function of food.
- Social stories could also be used to support a child to know what to do when eating out of the house. It may be helpful to include photos of restaurants and talk through a menu before visiting a new place. Doing a practice visit before a child is required to eat in a new environment will help reduce their anxiety.

Learning to eat new foods



My name is Chris.



I like to eat chips, chicken nuggets and yoghurts. I like to drink milk.



We all need to eat lots of different foods to stay healthy.



I am learning about trying new foods and drinks.



Sometimes I feel uncomfortable near new food and drink. This is ok.



If I eat new foods it will help me stay healthy.



If I try to eat more new foods mum will say "good trying" and I will get a sticker.

Sensory Difficulties



- Eating involves coordinating a range of sensory and motor inputs. Children may also experience sensory issues in relation to the physical environment where they eat.
- Specific tastes, textures, smells, sights and sounds may be experienced very intensely by your child, or they may only have a low awareness of them.
- Try offering a familiar food in different textures, gradually change to textured sensations by increasing or decreasing the amount of blending to ensure a familiar flavour but slightly more textured sensation (e.g. if your child accepts commercially soft cheese dunkers, try blending in thicker cream cheese).
- Try mashing soft foods. You can mash to different degrees to introduce slightly new textures to foods (e.g. smooth but including soft and easy-to-swallow lumps).
- Another way of introducing new textures is to add soft textured foods to thickened purées (e.g. pasta, dried cereals, which will soften in soup, sauces, ice-cream and add texture).
- Some children eat very slowly because of their slower processing speed, it might take them more time to coordinate their movements. Prompting them to keep going and praising them for their behaviour might help.
- Some children may need different foods to be separated during meals. Using segregated plates can help a child feel less anxious.

Set clear limits and stick to them



- Talk your child through their timetable regularly.
- Some children seem to want to eat constantly. If a child has eaten in the last couple of hours, they may not physically need food. Redirect them to what you want them to be doing instead of eating, such as, “it’s time for outside play”. This includes reducing and stopping any food or drink given during the night.
- Make sure your child knows what activities will happen before the next meal so that you can redirect them with a clear structure to your child’s day.
- Unplanned or frequent snacking or grazing throughout the day leads to children being less hungry at planned mealtimes and can also increase the risk of dental problems and excessive weight gain.
- It might be useful to keep favourite foods out of sight and out of reach of children who are likely to demand them outside of mealtimes or help themselves.
- Try only offering a child’s favourite food at most every second day. This reduces the likelihood of a child cutting a food from their diet in the future.
- Instead of always providing a favourite food at a meal or snack time, try encouraging your child to choose from two or three foods you would like them to eat, for example, using a picture choice board.

Charlie's Choose Board "Today I'm going to try..."

choose



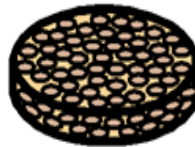
grapes



banana



rice cake



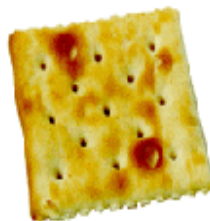
smoothie



apple



cracker



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Motivators and rewards



- Think about your child's special interests and how you might incorporate these into eating and mealtimes to engage them.
- If they like numbers put their plate of food on weighing scales so they can watch the numbers go down as they eat.
- Check if their favourite character branded plates, placemats or cutlery are available.
- The best way to encourage a desired behaviour is by consistent rewards.
- Reward even the smallest steps towards the behaviour that you would like to see, including touching the food or allowing it next to their plate.
- Rewards include: praise, star charts, comics, stickers, watching favourite TV programme, which are specific to your child.
- Rewards that occur soon after the desired behaviour are more powerful, a sticker or star on a chart can counts towards a bigger reward.
- Making scrapbooks are a fun way of making food less scary and increase understanding. You or your child could write, draw, or stick pictures or symbols of all the foods they like at the front, and foods that you would like them to try at the back. They can help choose which ones will move forward to a "Foods to try" section and praise and rewards can be used when your child tries any of these foods. You could plan this into their weekly routine.

Helpful Snacks

Try to offer snacks two or three times a day that have lots of calories, so if your child only a small amount, you know they are getting plenty of energy:



eats

- Buttered toast or plain biscuits with peanut butter, cream cheese or hummus.
- Slices of cheese with crackers.
- Pancake or scone with butter.
- Breadsticks with cream cheese, hummus or peanut butter.
- Full-fat yoghurt or fromage frais with fruit slices.
- Slices of apple with peanut butter.

Helping your child learn Oral-motor Skills

- Sit and eat with your child.
- Show them how you eat, e.g. model “bite and pull” skills with different food, show children you move food to the back of your mouth.

Step 2: Food play / science sessions

It is important to take the pressure off trying new foods and introduce new foods away from mealtimes. Try having “**food play**” or “**food science**” as part of a child’s daily routine to practice interacting with food.

Food sessions are a chance to build up different sensory experiences and reduce anxiety of new foods through play and fun with no pressure to eat.

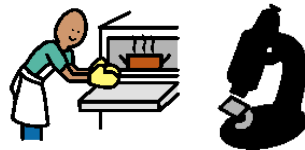
- Make sure the child knows what is expected in these sessions. Use symbols or photographs to show what it is you want them to do.



- Start with a child tolerating a food in the room or in front of them, just looking at it or counting how many.
- Move on to interacting with a food with utensils, e.g. slicing or mixing.
- Move to touching with one finger tip aiming to increase touch to whole hand.
- Move on to smelling it, this may take longer for some children so combine it with other steps.
- Move to have them food touching other parts of their body towards their neck and face, e.g. racing up their arm, wearing it as a hat or necklace.
- Move on to “kissing food goodbye”; you can model this yourself or introduce a puppet that initially throws the food away but then tries it and finds it tasty!

- Move onto licking, biting food and holding food in their mouth.
- Give your child permission not to eat the novel food.
- Counting can be used as a way of letting a child know how long they need to do a step, such as counting to 10 before taking it out of their mouth.
- It is ok to teach your child to spit or 'blow out' food from their mouth. Children are more likely to put a food in their mouth if they know they can take it out again.
- Working through these steps might take some time and a lot of practice. It is important to only move on a stage, e.g. touch with a utensil to touching with hand, when a child is comfortable and ready.
- Have a plate or box where the food can go when it is "finished". It does not matter if the new or less preferred food is not eaten.
- Involve your child in process of throwing food away. Initially not touching it, using utensils to scrape plates, picking food up and putting away in a separate bowl on table or in the bin.

Older children and young people



- Older children may engage more with a 'food science' approach – investigating what makes up foods and looking at it in detail.
- Involving children in unpacking shopping, food preparation, baking favourite items, and cooking food for others and for themselves will increase their experience around new foods.

How to choose food for food play

- Think about what foods the child is curious about or has liked in the past, as well as key foods you would like them to eat.
- Think about what motivator to use, such as, praise or stickers, and make sure this can be immediate.
- Introduce new foods that may be similar in texture, shape, colour and moistness or dryness as the foods they already enjoy.
- Be prepared to praise any small attempt at tolerating the new food and make sure your expectations are realistic to begin with.
- Start small, with one or two new foods and then stop; do not be tempted to keep going, as your child may become too anxious then lose trust in you.

Helpful tips

- Sit in front of a mirror with your child, and model placing a new taste on your lips. Encourage them to do the same, and give them a cloth to wipe it away if they need to.
- Use real food in messy play with no expectation to eat it. Introduce a variety of textures to encourage exploration of food, such as, cooked pasta, breadsticks or powdered flavour mousse desserts.
- Encourage your child to play with cooking pans, cutlery, bowls or toy food. Play is a good way of introducing new plates or cups so your child can learn about them before having to use them.
- Use puppets or toys in play. You can model feeding, use pretend and real foods, show a range of eating and foods engagement skills, to puppet and yourself.
- Encourage your child to feed you, exaggerate your response to food with pleasurable sounds.
- It may take **months** of offering a new food for a child to readily accept it, so be prepared to persevere.

Generalising skills

- You may need to go through the above process for each new food, but as your child becomes familiar with the structure of food sessions this may speed up.
- You can then introduce one of the new foods you have practiced with at mealtimes. Start with very small amounts only and pair it with a favourite food.

- Make one change at a time during mealtimes. Too many changes at once may become overwhelming. Your child may then manage their anxiety by going back to foods that are familiar and avoiding the new items.
- Continue to use visual supports at mealtimes and continue with immediate praise. Don't put too much focus on the new food just keep praising good trying and skills around eating.

Step 3: Food Chaining

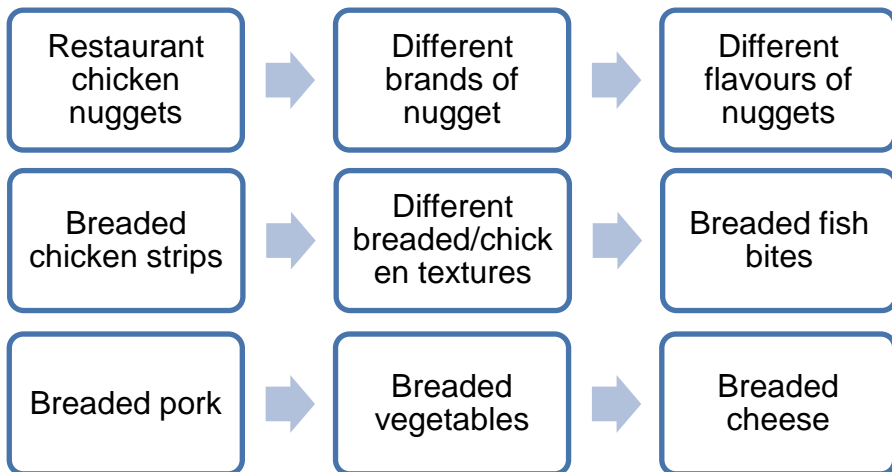
Food chaining involves expanding your child's food range by introducing new foods that are similar to foods they already eat. You can begin to introduce new foods with slightly different tastes, textures and appearances.



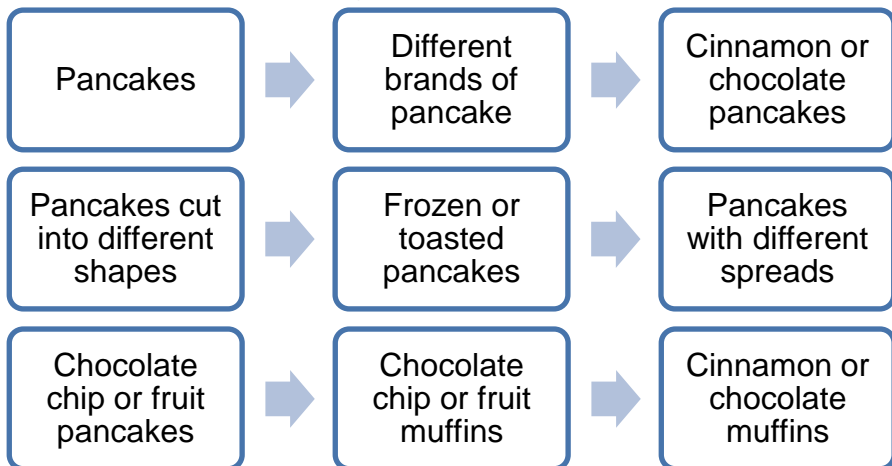
- Begin with familiar or accepted foods, and start by trying a different brand, or a food that is very similar in colour, texture and taste to your child's preferred foods, such as, different brands of vanilla yoghurt.
- Once your child has a small range of foods try to introduce new foods with a **different taste** to something they already eat but that has the same texture and temperature, e.g. if your child eats vanilla yoghurt try peach yoghurt.
- When your child has expanded some new flavours introduce foods with **different textures** while maintaining familiar flavours, e.g. different types of peach products: mousse, yoghurt, custard, puree, and frozen fruit.
- Once your child has expanded some new textures you can **vary taste and texture together**, e.g. different fruit purees, different soft fruits, dried fruits, fruit crisps, sliced fruits, fruit smoothie cubes.
- Introduce foods in food sessions or serve small portions so you don't overwhelm your child.
- Encourage your child to take a small piece of a new food on their plate or on a small plate next to theirs (one piece or spoonful). Gradually increase the amount (two or three pieces) before working through the steps to eating.
- A low pressure environment works best. Give your child permission not to eat the new food.

- Be clear how much you expect them to eat, for example, two grapes.

Example: Fast food restaurant chicken nuggets

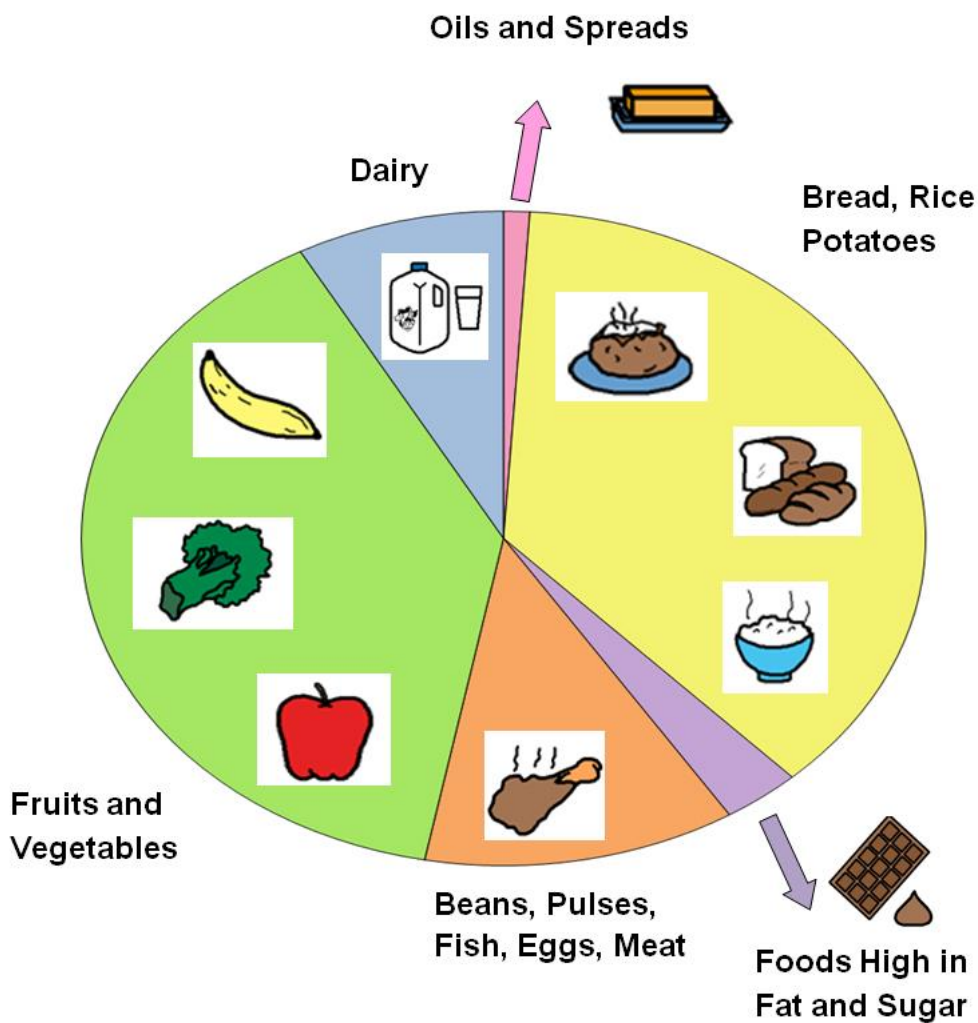


Example of food chaining: pancakes



Nutrition

Try to offer food in each of five food groups every day. Try offer proportions overall in line with the Eat Well.



Drinks



- Children who have lots of drinks that are rich in calories and energy (milk, fruit juices and fizzy or sweetened drinks) may have no appetite when it comes to meal or snack times.
- Try gradually reducing the number and amount of energy and calorie-rich drinks such as milk and juice, or dilute them with water, to encourage increased appetite for food.
- Give milk only after food is presented to a child or after food has been eaten.
- Milk can be added to other dishes to encourage the child to try new food.



Fruit and Vegetables

- Try a glass of fruit juice – dilute with water if preferred, or a smoothie.
- Offer chopped or sliced fruit as a snack.
- Offer raw vegetable sticks (carrot, celery, cucumber etc) and dips (guacamole, hummus).
- Try vegetables coated in breadcrumbs or fried or bake until golden brown.
- Mash swede, cauliflower or parsnip into mashed potato.

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 are good sources of vitamins and iron.
- Eat breakfast cereal along with fresh fruit juice as this helps absorb iron.



Meat

- Puree meat into gravy and serve over potatoes or even pasta.
- Make the meat seem more appealing by arranging it into shapes the child might like e.g. their initials, a smiley face.
- Add corned beef into baked beans if eaten.
- Try pâté or meat paste on bread, toast, crackers or oat cakes, helpful for children who do not have an established rotary chew.

Salt



It is a good idea to limit salty snacks like crisps and reduce the amount of processed and ready meals.

The daily recommended maximum amount of salt children should eat depends on age:

1–3 years	≤2g a day (0.8g sodium)
4–6 years	≤3g a day (1.2g sodium)
7–10 years	≤ 5g a day (2g sodium)
11 years +	≤6g a day (2.5g sodium)

About 3/4 of the salt we eat is already in the food we buy, such as breakfast cereals, soups, breads and sauces. Approximate salt contents of foods:

Food	Salt Content
White Bread (1 slice)	0.4 g
Breaded Chicken Nuggets (x5)	0.3 g
Crisps (per packet)	0.5 g
Fish Fingers (x3)	0.7 g
Sausages (x2)	1.6 g
Tomato Ketchup (per sachet)	0.2g

Food and Drink Diary

	Time (time started and finished)	Place (where and who was there)	Food and drink offered (type/ amount)	Amount taken	Any problems?
Breakfast					
Morning snack					
Lunch					
Afternoon snack					
Dinner					
Evening snack					
Any other food or drink					

References

Food Chaining information taken from:

“Food Chaining – The Proven 6-Step Plan to Stop Picky Eating, Solve Feeding Problems, and Expand Your Child’s Diet” by Fraker, Fishbein, Cox, Walbert (2007).

Food chaining example Zoe Connor (2014)

Symbols taken from Boardmaker Studio:

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