

Some Strategies for Common Feeding or Mealtime Issues

Written by: Brandon Davison, Instructor Therapist, TPAS



It is common for children with autism to have a variety of difficulties at mealtimes. No two children will experience the exact same problems, but picky eating and having trouble sitting for a whole meal are common issues.

Children who eat a small number of foods and dislike trying new ones are called selective eaters. Many parents refer to this behaviour as picky eating. If your child is a selective eater, increasing the kinds of food he eats may help him to get necessary vitamins and minerals for healthy growth. Here are some guidelines to help you begin to expand the variety of foods your child will eat:

STEP 1: PICK A SPECIFIC SKILL:

A good option for a selective eater is to pick one food (e.g. carrots) or food group (e.g. vegetables) and increase your child's tolerance to this food. Your child's ability to tolerate this food will be individual, it may be your goal

for him to taste or even simply to touch the new food.

STEP 2: COLLECT DATA: Data is writing down information that may help you create a feeding plan. This may include recording your child's favourite foods, foods he will eat, if prompted, and foods he will not eat. Write down how he reacts to new foods – does he ignore it, touch it, throw it away, or have a tantrum? Once you create and introduce a feeding plan, it will be important to continue to collect data to assist decisions that you make regarding whether the plan is working.

STEP 3: AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT THE FEEDING PLAN MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

1. Remove distractions such as toys, books, or television while trying new foods.
2. Introduce new foods one at a time.
3. Present only a little bit of the

new food.

4. Give your child the new food and one of his favourite foods at the same time.
5. Allow your child to touch or even play with the new food. If he has thrown or ignored new foods in the past, praise him for touching it.
6. Reinforce any improvements that your child demonstrates!
7. Try this approach for a few days, even if your child does not accept the food at first. It may take regular exposure before he touches the food or even allows it to be close by.

Another area that your child may have trouble with, is sitting at the table until a meal is finished. Teaching your child to stay seated for an entire meal will establish a regular meal routine and increase exposure to the foods you eat as a family. Try these steps to increase sitting at mealtime:

STEP 1: COLLECT DATA: Record how long your child can sit

appropriately at the table. Sitting appropriately may mean facing the table, keeping their bottom on the chair and their feet on the floor. Once you have started a plan, continue to collect data on how long your child is sitting to assist decisions that you make regarding whether the plan is working.

STEP 2: PICK A TARGET: Use the data that you collected to choose how long your child will sit for the next meal. If he is able to remain sitting at the table for an average of one minute over several days, one minute may be your initial target.

STEP 3: AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT A PLAN TO INCREASE SITTING MAY LOOK LIKE:

1. Allow your child to pick a special treat or toy that he is able to have when he has sat at the table for the required amount of time.
2. Use a visual timer so that your child can see how long he is expected to sit.
3. Reinforce your child for sitting for the expected amount of time.
4. Once your child has been successful for 2-3 meals, increase the amount of time you expect him to sit.

Although the process of changing your child's mealtime habits may be initially difficult and time consuming, it has the potential to make mealtime less demanding. If you have any questions about your child's eating habits or the strategies discussed in this article, please contact your Supervising Therapist.

How to Transfer Success to the Home Environment

Written by: Beth Collier and Maria Pinto, Family Support Coaches, TPAS

As a parent, you have the most influence on your child. You can be a role model and help your child develop healthy eating habits for life. Sometimes there may be challenges around food and mealtimes. There are ways to address meal time challenges that can be very effective.

Some children may be considered “picky eaters”, which is a refusal to eat certain foods. This is a stage that all children go through. As a parent, you can take data to become aware of your child’s eating habits. Data may include tracking what your child eats, refuses to eat or noting how the food is prepared (i.e. raw, cooked, steamed etc.)

As an active member in your child’s learning, parents can use a behavioural approach to plan for successful mealtimes. This may include:

- » Establishing a mealtime routine
- » Setting up for mealtimes up in a similar manner. This may include a familiar placement, and/or a certain seat at the table to help define the environment
- » Choosing one goal to work on at a

time (e.g. sitting at the table for 5 minutes)

- » Offering only one new food at a time and presenting this new food along with a familiar, preferred food
- » Allowing your child many opportunities to explore new foods before tasting them

As parents, you should engage with your child’s clinical team to develop strategies to reach the goals you have set. Share what you have done; look for ways to be consistent across all the learning environments your child participates in. Communication and collaboration will support generalization.

Keep informed of new ideas by borrowing a book from the TPAS Parent Library or learn from other parents through education sessions offered through TPAS Parent Education and Support. Call your Family Support Coach to find out more about these sessions: *ABA Key terms, Building ABA into Family Routines, and Nutrition and Autism*. They are a great place to start to learn more about preparing for successful mealtimes!

Talking to a Parent About the Nutrition and Autism Workshop

Written by Heidi Hoile, Family Support Coach, in conversation with, Holly Garel, a parent who attended the Autism and Nutrition workshop in November 2013.



The Autism and Nutrition workshop focuses on providing parents/caregivers with well researched information regarding typical stages of nutrition, common childhood health issues related to diet, and how they may present themselves in a child with autism.

Why did you attend the Nutrition and Autism workshop?

I enjoy attending the parent workshops. I always find it helpful to talk with other parents about different issues we are having, especially with eating. My son eats a lot, but always the same foods. The foods he likes are not very nutritious and it is difficult to get him to try new things.

I wanted to learn how to get him to eat a wider variety of foods.

What did you learn as a result of attending the workshop?

I learned that I should keep offering different foods even if he doesn’t try them at first because he might take a bite one day. I give him food he likes on a plate with the food I want him to try. That way I know he will still eat. This way it is less stressful for me.

What is the most important piece of information you took away?

The thing that stands out is that if my son doesn’t eat something the first time, it doesn’t mean he will never eat it. I have to give him a chance to touch it and smell it a bunch of times and then he might try it. Even if he plays with the food, he is just getting used to how it feels.

Call your Family Support Coach to find out how to sign up for the *Nutrition and Autism* workshop and a variety of other workshops that will help you to support your child’s learning at home.

Additional Resources on Nutrition and Eating Habits



Just Take a Bite: Easy, Effective Answers to Food Aversions and Eating Challenges!

By: Lori Ernsperger & Tania Stegen-Hanson

This book from the TPAS Parent Library addresses a variety of common feeding issues.

Helpful chapters include:

- Environmental and Behavioral Factors Contributing to Problems with Eating
- Designing and Implementing a Comprehensive Treatment Plan

Eat Right Ontario:

Reliable information and advice on nutrition and healthy eating.
www.eatrightontario.ca

ConnectABILITY.ca:

Accessible, self-directed access to valuable information and tools.
<http://connectability.ca/2011/10/05/mealtime-accomodations/>

Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network (ATN):

Exploring Feeding Behavior in Autism: A Parent’s Guide helps parents and professionals better understand the “nuts and bolts” of feeding issues.
<http://www.autismspeaks.org/science/find-resources-programs/autism-treatment-network/tools-you-can-use/atn-air-p-guide-exploring-feeding-behavior>