



## Encouraging Healthy Eating Habits

Some individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may be fussy eaters. If your child is losing weight, shows signs of poor health, only eats a few different foods or if mealtime behaviors are causing stress for both you and your child then it may be beneficial to try implementing some behavioural strategies during mealtime routines.

### WHY ARE HEALTHY EATING HABITS IMPORTANT?

If your child has language delays, is resistant to change or has sensory processing issues then these could be impeding his or her ability to participate in a successful mealtime routine. Your child may be unable to communicate their preferences or when they are feeling full. They may find certain textures, flavours and smells overwhelming or may not find food appealing or tasty. Transitioning to mealtime may be a struggle or there may be a reluctance to try new foods. Oral-motor delays could also interfere with chewing and swallowing. Individuals with ASD are at greater risk of developing gastro-intestinal issues which can make the experience of eating aversive. If you suspect your child has an oral motor delay, gastro-intestinal issues or allergies, *it is important to seek medical advice to rule out any medical issues that can interfere with feeding.* Building a better mealtime routine and expanding food varieties will increase social inclusion for your child in school and during family gatherings and will reduce mealtime stress for the family. Most importantly, it will provide your child with the nutrients required for healthy development.

## HOW TO ENCOURAGE HEALTHY EATING HABITS

**Maintain routine:** Keep a consistent schedule and feeding routine. This makes things predictable and expectations clear.

**Eating times:** Note how long your child can stay at the table successfully and start there. Slowly increase the time they are expected to sit by 1-2 minutes. You can use a timer so your child knows how long they have to sit for.

**Transitions:** Try motivating your child to come to the table with a favourite toy. You can slowly remove those toys once your child becomes more successful.

**Seating:** Position your child securely and in a way that they cannot easily run away. Have foods easily accessible as they might spontaneously try something new.

**Reduce distractions:** Remove anything that could take your child's attention away from mealtime (e.g., tv) Ensure everyone starts mealtime at the same time so your child is not distracted by what others are doing.

**Choice:** Give your child foods to choose from, they are more likely to eat what they select.

**Portion Sizes:** When introducing a new food, consider starting with a very small amount and slowly increasing the portion size.

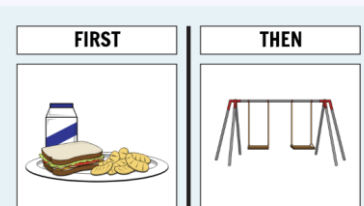
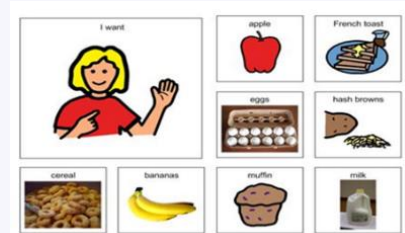
**Modeling:** Lead by example and demonstrate the behaviour you wish to see at the dinner table. Get the whole family involved.

**Visual supports:** A first/then visual (i.e., 'first carrots, then cookie') or schedule can let your child know what the routine is and what is expected of them. A reward chart can be used to reward your child for appropriate mealtime behaviour.

**Avoid snacking:** Reduce snacking throughout the day. Your child will be more likely to eat at mealtimes and try new foods if he or she is hungry.

**Food sensory play:** Try introducing new food through sensory play. For example, place new fruits in front of your child and allow them to look, smell, touch and taste.

**Children's literature:** Reading books about food can increase chances of your child trying new foods. Read stories daily. talk about how foods taste and how they keep us healthy.



### FINAL TIPS:

- Patience is key. It may take a while for changes to occur. Be persistent and choose strategies that work for you and your child.
- It may be helpful to track information daily on your child's eating behaviour. You can track which foods they eat, how much they eat, or for how long they eat. This can help you notice any changes.

Government of Canada – [Tips from Canada's Food Guide](#)