

Nutritional Considerations for Autistic Populations

Food Routines and Sensory issues



As part of the Nutrition and Autism support series this help-sheet looks at what practical steps can be taken to ensure that the eating environment and food experiences are as stress-free as possible. We consider the impact that routine has on a child's ability to relax around food and what sensory issues you may need to be aware of.

Routines

Children with autism benefit from having structure and routine, and this should extend to mealtimes. We shouldn't under-estimate the importance of this routine to a child, especially to children on the Autism spectrum. Routines help children to engage in activities and they are then more at ease with situations. Without routines it can feel difficult to cope with transitional activities; this could be moving from playtime to snack time. If things are at the same time every day this will feel less stressful for the child. Likewise, if food is produced as a 'surprise' or the plans change suddenly, it may well be rejected and could cause the child some anxiety and upset.

There are practical ways to have routines in place without it feeling 'over prescribed' or too rigid. Here are some tips: -

- Plan a weekly menu (we know most people do this anyway) and have this visible – it may be helpful to have the same things on



the same days for a sustained period of time, this ensures the children feel secure and prepared around the food that is going to appear at each meal and snack time.

- Have times clearly visible for lunch and snacks with pictures if possible.
- Ensure the transition to meal/snack time is comfortable for the child. Some children may find rushing in to lunch quite stressful and may need a more gradual transition between activities.
- Be mindful that routine experiences around objects will be of great importance to the child so if they usually have a green cup, switching to yellow could cause stress and anxiety and lead to an unsuccessful eating experience.
- Some children may prefer to eat with their hands. This is something we usually try to discourage in line with 'table manners' but for children within Autistic populations, sensory experiences are very important. We encourage them to touch and smell their foods as this can make it more comfortable for them to then potentially try the foods if they are more familiar with them.

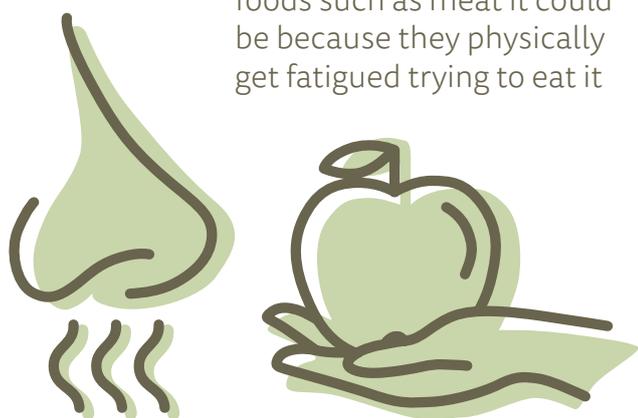
It will be practically impossible to encourage a child who has become stressed and upset over a situation to then get them to actually eat anything. Regardless of whether you feel they 'surely must be hungry' and are anxious yourself that they need to eat; when we are stressed, we biologically shut down our hunger response. Our stress hormones react to enable us to 'fight or flight'. The last thing biologically we will then want to do is to sit down and eat something. Feeling agitated prior to a meal/snack/situation around food can also potentially create negative associations with the eating experience.

With this in mind we need to be mindful of the sensory aspects, we have touched on these above but let's look a bit deeper.

Sensory awareness

In the context of eating, this means being more or less sensitive to how foods; look, smell, taste and feel, as mentioned above touching foods can be helpful in gaining familiarity and confidence with foods. It's highly likely that children on the Autism spectrum will prefer foods of a similar texture; either soft or hard / crunchy foods. Both of these have limitations but having a preference for smooth foods can impact on the muscle development required to chew foods. If a child seems to dislike 'chewy'

foods such as meat it could be because they physically get fatigued trying to eat it



and find this sensation unpleasant. Avoiding these foods and sticking with smooth foods exacerbates the issue and doesn't strengthen the muscles so introducing different textures should be encouraged.

Children need to trust you when it comes to their food intake and that trust can be broken if new foods are introduced by stealth into familiar foods. Whilst it's common to 'hide' vegetables by making vegetable-based sauces etc, for children on the Autism spectrum their sensory awareness of familiar foods (sight, smell, touch, taste) would detect the deception. This potentially could cause an issue with trust and potentially 'contaminate' the once familiar food resulting in its refusal.

Desire for familiarity

Cognitive rigidity and the 'desire for sameness' can often explain why a child may demonstrate particular routines or rituals around food, such as meal times, having to have the same plate, utensils or the same colour of cup. This is, to the child, often the first predictor of whether a food is safe. If it feels familiar then it feels safe.

It can feel frustrating to stick to the preferred and safe foods, as they can often be beige and limited in variety but in order to maintain weight and growth patterns, these safe foods need to be allowed first. Then the secondary (but crucially important) issue is how to broaden the range of safe foods. We explore this issue in a linked article in our Nutrition and Autism series – **'Introducing New Tastes & Taste expectations'**.

Recognising Hunger

Another sensory issue to be aware of is 'Interoception' this is a sense that enables you to feel what is happening inside our body, it is referred to as the eighth sensory system or the 'hidden sense'. For example, it's the sense that tells you when you need to go to the bathroom, you just know when you need to, that's interoception. The interoceptive system does a lot more than that! It has nerve receptors all over our body giving us the ability to feel what is happening and respond to it. What is



particularly relevant to children on the Autism spectrum is that interoception can be impaired, meaning they may not be able to recognise or respond to the feelings of hunger or thirst. If we don't feel hungry being faced with food can be a stressful experience.

It's recommended that children (whilst maybe not recognising they feel hungry or thirsty) are not allowed to go for excessive periods without food or drink as this can lead to other issues such as constipation. This is often why the safe foods are offered so often in place of perhaps more suitable and nutritious alternatives! It's better to eat something than nothing. Ensuring the preferred safe foods are available but only in small quantities when trying to slowly and carefully introduce other foods too.

As we discuss in the trying new foods help-sheet and in our interview with Charlotte Olson, author of Sammy's New Food Week; **introduce foods slowly, lower your own expectations of what you hope the child will eat, it's likely they won't eat anywhere near as much as you'd like. Praise often and reward (but not with other foods!)**



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