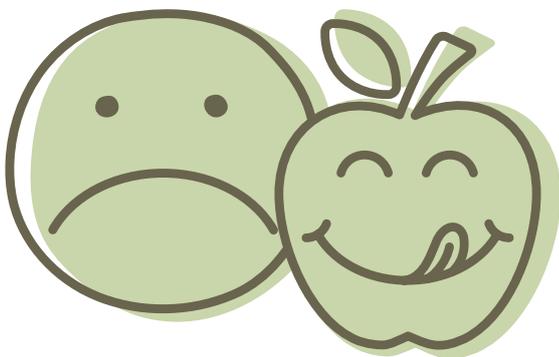


Nutritional Considerations for Autistic Populations

Introducing New Tastes & Taste Expectations



As part of the Nutrition and Autism support series this help-sheet looks at how to introduce new tastes to children who may have narrow eating habits. This is particularly relevant to our Nutrition and Autism support series as up to 70% of parents with children on the autism spectrum report problems with excessively narrow eating habits. With this in mind, you are very likely to encounter this issue in your early years setting at some point.



We understand the importance of formative nutrition habits and how these often translate into adulthood, so we would like to offer some support in the form of practical ways to encourage a wider range of foods consumed along with some signs to look out for when it comes to recognising if a child may have a bigger issue with food than simply **'being a bit fussy'**.

Research is ongoing to fully understand what causes picky eating in many of those with autism and how to intervene to expand food choices but one thing we know is that often there are underlying anxiety and sensory issues surrounding food.

Top tips from the team of experts at TPNK.

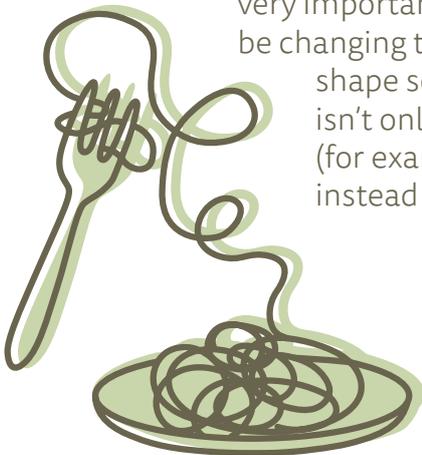
Medical Issues - are there any underlying medical issues creating the dislike/aversion to foods/food groups? Children on the Autism spectrum are more likely to suffer with gastro-intestinal (GI) disorders, allergies and intolerances. If a child has had an upset tummy or a reaction to a food its perfectly understandable that they would be unwilling to try that or something similar even if they were unable to articulate this as the reason. It's important to rule out more serious issues before attempting the rest of the steps! Working with parents/carers, keeping detailed notes of food patterns and behaviours around foods all help with this (see separate help-sheet on GI disorders within Autistic populations).

Food Conflict - one of the biggest issues with food is the anxiety around it. The bigger the issue becomes the less likely the child is to try the food and the more anxious they will feel around food/meal times in the future. In the help-sheet on sensory issues we explore the impact the eating environment has on a child's ability to enjoy food.

Neophobia - the term used to describe an overwhelming fear of new or unfamiliar foods. Research shows that children on the Autism spectrum are more food neophobic and that this could impact future health outcomes. The difficulties, of course lie in the every-day practical steps involved in removing the neophobia and encouraging a child to try a wider range of foods, we know that forcing a child doesn't work, this increases anxiety and exacerbates the issue so what steps can we take?

- 1. Get creative** – we are reversing the idea of ‘don’t play with your food’ and instead encouraging children to do so. For many the issue may be sensory – being able to smell and touch the food may help.
- 2. Incremental steps** – it’s highly unlikely a child will eat a whole plate of food and setting an expectation that they will can lead to disappointment, accepting that it would be a great result if they ate one thing will be more realistic.
- 3. Praise** – it’s very important to be patient and encouraging (no matter how frustrating it may feel). For the child, the experience with food can be highly stressful and upsetting. If they have made any progress this should be met with huge encouragement and if they haven’t, they shouldn’t be made to feel it’s been a waste of time. It can take a very long time to make progress but persevering in the early years will help with adolescent and adult eating habits.

- 4. Food changes** – making small changes is very important, this could be changing the pasta shape so that there isn’t only one option (for example penne instead of spaghetti).



- 5. Choice** – children like to have some elements of control over their food intake. This is especially important when a child feels anxious over food. Enabling them to make some of the decisions is important.

A good way to do this is to offer 3 bowls of vegetables, it’s highly unlikely they will pick all three (they may well pick none but persevere!) but they may pick one and that would be progress. Often the difference between a child eating it or not is whether they feel it’s been inflicted on them or whether they have had the power to choose.

- 6. Reward** – rewarding children is great but please (very big please) do not use food as a reward. When we reward with food it is usually along the lines of “you can have chocolate if you eat broccoli” this then makes food rewards an expectation and encourages inappropriate behavioural patterns and experiences surrounding food, Broccoli (the nutritious element) is seen as the ‘bad guy’ to get through to reach the reward of chocolate (empty calories, high in fat and sugar) this creates food memories and associations and can lead to the expectation of reward each time.

Praise and reward but please not with foods!



In the Nutrition and Autism support series we have a Q&A with the author Charlotte Olson. Amongst her book series Charlotte has written Sammy’s New Food Week. This looks at how Sammy tries a new food every day of the week. It may well take much longer than this but this book is a wonderful resource to share with children.



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