

## Early Years Inclusion Team

### **Mealtime tips for children presenting with Social Communication Difficulties.**

Children's nutrition and mealtime behaviour are common issues for parents everywhere.

Children with Social Communication Difficulties are far more likely to be overly selective in what they will and will not eat. As a result, many of them have less nutritional variety in their diets than their typically developing siblings and friends. Fear of new foods and outright food refusal are among the most common concerns.

Support to manage these issues is available for families of children with Social Communication Difficulties from a range of health professionals and educational practitioners.

These include:

- Paediatricians
- Dieticians
- Occupational Therapists
- Speech and Language Therapists
- Specialist Educational Practitioners – SEND Early Years Keyworker, Early Years Inclusion Team

Below are some strategies that can prove the most successful in supporting children and their families in their pursuit of healthy eating habits.

Keep in mind that it's a journey that almost always involves some mistakes alongside its successes.

- **Rule out physical problems.**

It's not uncommon for some children with Social Communication Difficulties to have medical issues that make eating unpleasant. These can include dental cavities, physical difficulty with chewing and painful acid reflux. So, make sure that your child's doctor has ruled this out before proceeding.



- **Ease into mealtime**

Many children who have Social Communication Difficulties experience anxiety at mealtimes. The underlying reasons can include sensory aversions and fear of unfamiliar foods. Unintentionally, families can make the anxiety worse by trying to force a child to eat, setting up a pattern of mealtime stress.

To reverse this pattern, parents and carers can spend a few minutes helping the child relax before mealtime. One way to do this is to spend five minutes practicing deep breathing together, the two of you can blow bubbles or even a wind instrument such as a recorder.

- **Sit together at a table for meals**

It's important it is for a family to eat together as a matter of routine. Environmental cues help all children – and especially those who have Social Communication Difficulties – learn what they're supposed to be doing. For example, a child's bed is an environmental cue for sleeping. Similarly, the family table needs to be for eating.

In addition, eating together helps your child learn through imitation. Children are wired to copy others. And a child will be more likely to put a new food in his or her mouth after seeing you do so.



Try to use the same table for all meals and have family members sit in the same chairs to further cue your child where to sit and what to expect. Keep the mealtime routine the same.... in the long term try to avoid using distractors, such as electronic devices, to get them to eat.

- **Build acceptance to new foods through gradual exposure**

Many children have particularly strong reactions to a food's appearance. Use the principles of gradual exposure to help them learn to control and eventually get rid of these fears.



- **Have set times for meals and stick to them**

It's so important to eat on a routine. Space meals and snacks through the day. You may want to remove snacks – including milk and juice – in between. The idea is to train your child's internal hunger signals to specific mealtimes. This helps your child's body expect food and accept food at designated times.

- **Expand what your child already eats**

If for example a child's constant favourite is white spaghetti with no sauce. You can start "stretching" food acceptance by offering, say, a different brand of white spaghetti, then trying brown rice or another type of spaghetti. Eventually, you're moving to spaghetti with a little butter, then a white sauce, etc. The idea is to offer a food that remains familiar looking while building tolerance to *small and incremental* changes. A change from spaghetti to penne pasta, for example, might be too much to handle simply because it looks too different.

- **Take food out of their brand boxes or containers**

Some children may only eat a specific brand of a specific food. Avoid this issue altogether by taking food out of boxes as soon as they unpack the groceries. Put food in clear containers. Rotate brands as much as possible so your child is less likely to get "stuck" on a highly specific taste, look and texture.

- **Encourage your child to explore, play and get messy with food**

Children learn through play, and this includes playing with food. This fits together nicely with the principle of “gradual exposure”. Encourage your child to interact with food through his or her senses. Talk about the look and feel of foods. Make interesting shapes with cookie cutters, etc.

**For further information see below- Messy Play Ideas/Food Is Fun**



- **Concentrate on the food not your child’s behaviour**

As much as possible, try to ignore challenging behaviours at the table. Many children learn to escape the family meal by engaging in spitting, whining, banging on the table and the like. Try diverting attention from the negative behaviour with a conversation about the food.

This can involve asking the following questions to get the whole family involved in “food learning.”

- Is this a wet food or dry food?
- Does this have a big smell or a little smell?
- How is this (pitta bread) different from [regular bread]?
- What sound does this food make when you chew it?
- What other foods do we eat that are the same colour?

- **Food Diaries**

Start to take note of what is eaten and when. Sometimes a food diary can be reassuring – you may in fact see that your child eats a wider range of foods than you originally thought. Here are some examples of what to include:

- What time of day did they eat?
- What did they eat?
- Where did they eat?
- How much did they eat?
- Who was there?
- How did people around respond to eating the particular food?
- What was happening in the room or around the young person as they ate?