

Feeding and eating problems are common in children with ASD.

- Difficulties include only eating very few types of foods, going long periods of time without eating, or over eating, and Pica (eating non-foods).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected food availability.

- Some foods are currently in short supply, which can be challenging for children with ASD who have restrictive diets.
- This can make mealtimes especially difficult, as children's favourite foods might need to be substituted for alternative foods which are available.

Strategies for addressing eating when preferred foods are not available

Communication

It is important to communicate in a clear, calm and consistent way.

A social story can help children to understand that their preferred foods might not always be available due to unexpected changes such as the COVID-19 lockdown. Please see the next page for a social story that explains food shortages and the importance of trying new foods.

Present information visually, you could create weekly or daily menus of foods with meal times displayed in a prominent position to create structure.

Have a food group chart with a household rule that everyone must have at least one food from each food group every day. The NHS Eatwell Guide can be found here: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>



Reward

Reward systems can be effective, but avoid using a preferred food as a reward for trying a new or non-preferred food, as this could make the preferred food even more attractive and the non-preferred food appear as a chore. Instead choose a reward unrelated to food (e.g. extra screen time minutes).

Ensure the emphasis of the reward is not just on eating a certain amount of a non-preferred food, but on tolerating new food being around or tasting a new food.

Modelling

Participating in, or modelling, the behaviour you're trying to encourage is helpful (e.g. the whole family follows the rule about eating something from each food group or tries a new food together).

The Good Parenting Food Guide is a book written by Health Psychologist, Professor Jane Ogden, which offers advice based on psychological research for how to encourage children to develop a healthy approach to eating: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Good-Parenting-Food-Guide-Managing/dp/1118709373>

(Please note this book is not ASD specific, but may provide useful information and helpful strategies which can apply to food-related difficulties in ASD)

ASD Resources & Support

The National Autistic Society helpline (0808 800 4104) is currently operating between 10am – 3pm, Monday to Friday due to COVID-19. The Autism Helpline can also be accessed online.

Please visit: <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines.aspx>

For more information about eating challenges and ASD.

Please visit: <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/eating.aspx>

ASD specific food related difficulties

Sensory experience

Many children with ASD can be over- or under-sensitive to smells, tastes, textures, sights and sounds. This can affect their experience of meals and relationship with food.

Those who are over-sensitive to smells and tastes tend to prefer bland tasting food and can find strong smelling foods overpowering. Those who are under-sensitive may prefer stronger flavours. Some might find the sensation of hard food or sloppy food unbearable.

Try modifying food to improve the sensory experience by:

- Puréeing or using food colouring to change texture and appearance.
- Introduce new food or textures in small steps for a **gradual desensitisation**:

First let your child look at the food, then touch it. Then invite them to put the food on their plate, then smell it, lick it, put it into their mouth, bite it, chew it and swallow it. Try not to react negatively to food being spat out as this is part of the process helping them to become comfortable with different foods being in and around their mouth.

Environment

It can be too distracting for some children with ASD to eat in a noisy environment. It might be better for them to eat in a quieter room instead. Playing favourite music or a story in the background can distract from anxiety around eating.

Food presentation

Attention to detail and difficulty coping with unexpected changes are both common features of ASD that may impact on your child's relationship with food and eating. The way that food is presented or positioned on the plate, or the packaging may dictate whether food is eaten or not.

Social considerations

Some children with ASD eat better in the company of family and may be more willing to try new foods if they see others trying the same food and enjoying it. Other children with ASD can find the social nature of mealtimes stressful, so might be more comfortable eating alone in a quiet room.

Special interests and routines

Special interests can be helpful in encouraging your child to eat more volume or variety of food (e.g. eating from a Thomas the Tank Engine plate, cutting food into rocket shapes, trying foods from a country/region of interest).

Many children with ASD rely on routine and predictability. They may need to eat at the same time each day, be seated in the same position at the table or always use the same plate or cutlery.

'Food can be tricky' Social Story

1



Eating different types of food is good for my body.



This helps my body to be healthy and to grow strong.



2

I like to eat some foods. 
I prefer not to eat other foods. 

That is OK.



Sometimes I like to eat the same foods because I know I already like them.

3

My parents/carers go to the supermarket to buy the food that I like to eat.

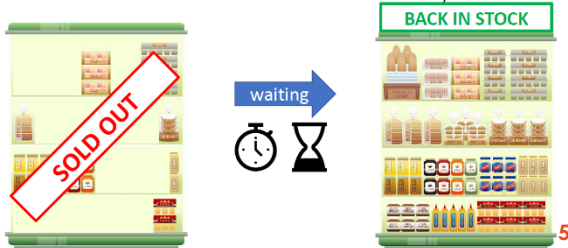


4

Sometimes the food that I like to eat is not always available in the supermarket.

The food I like will be back soon, but I will need to wait until the supermarket gets the food I like again.

Sometimes I will need to wait for a few days.



5

When I don't have my favourite foods to eat, I can try different foods that my parents offer to me.

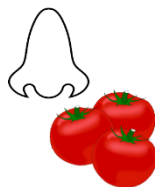
If I haven't tried it before I might not be sure about eating it.

Eating different foods can make me feel nervous, it is OK to feel like this.



6

I can smell the food first.



I can take a tiny bite to taste it.



7

If I like the food, I can ask my parents for some more.



Eating lots of different food is really good for me because it helps to keep my body healthy.



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