

Community Paediatric  
Psychology Service



# Eating difficulties

## Information for you



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This booklet has been designed to share some ideas on how to help your child if they have a very limited diet. Some families may try these things before seeking further support. Some children and young people may be referred for a specialist assessment around their limited diet. It may be helpful to try strategies from this booklet while you wait for an appointment.

## You're not alone

Eating difficulties with children can be due to a number of reasons and are extremely common. Research has shown that some parents can feel lonely and isolated when their child has difficulties with eating. We recognise that this can have a wider impact on family life. This is why we have provided this information sheet while you wait for further support as we know you'll want to do your best to help.



Eating difficulties can range from “fussy” or “picky” eating with children having a pattern of what they will eat, to some children presenting with disordered eating. Disordered eating is only confirmed following a detailed assessment.

It is really common for young people who have been diagnosed with autism to experience difficulties eating a variety of foods. Children without this diagnosis can also experience these difficulties too. Many parents report that their children may eat something in one location such as, a grandparent's house, or school. Sometimes they will eat something which has been made by one parent/carer but not the other. These are common patterns we see in children's eating and you're not alone.

## **Why might my child be so distressed when given food?**

Children and young people may experience distress when they are given food because of a common stage that we all go through called the "neophobic response". From toddlers into later childhood we can all experience distress or anxiety around the presentation of new things including, foods.

Some children won't eat broken biscuits or squashed sweets, this can be because it looks different to how they expect. You may have heard that you need to present a food to a child 10 to 20 times for them to show interest in it. This is because of the neophobic response.



At one stage this response from our brain (which increases our anxiety around new things) would have been helpful to keep us safe from eating things that may harm us. Now when we shop in supermarkets we know that foods are safe to eat, but this response hasn't switched off in our brains. This is usually a stage we grow out of but for some children it can take longer. They may require some support to try new things.

## **Some other reasons that children may show distress around food**

- It could be because they dislike the sensory experience of food. Sensory experiences from food don't just include taste. It could also be the smell, texture, or look of the food which your child finds upsetting.
- They may have concerns that foods may cause them to choke or become unwell. This may have happened to them in the past.
- Some children don't become distressed but they may have little interest in food. Motivating them to eat can be difficult and frustrating for parents/carers.



- Difficulties with eating could be related to some difficult earlier life experiences they have had.

All of these things can be considered during a specialist assessment.

## What can I do to help?

Firstly we recommend that everyone tries to reduce anxiety or tension around food and meal times. Children pick up on the emotions of others.

It's normal for family members to

- give prompts to your child to try something new
- to check how much they have eaten
- to monitor their progress compared to siblings or peers.

**However, doing these things may increase anxiety in your child** and make overcoming their difficulties with eating even harder. The first step is to fight that natural urge to do these things. All family members should try to be consistent with this (this may include wider family such as grandparents or carers).

The first goal when working with eating difficulties is to **make sure your child is getting enough calories and nutrients**. This is so they can grow and maintain a healthy weight.

**Note: If you are concerned around your child's growth, weight or nutritional intake seek medical advice from your family doctor (GP) or the Community Paediatric Service.**

Sometimes it is recommended that children take a multivitamin. If your child is anxious about this it may be helpful to pick a multivitamin that is similar to foods they may already eat (for example, a chewy fruity sweet). It could also be taken in another form (crushed or added to a home-made ice-lolly).

Don't surprise your child by adding the multivitamin to an accepted food. This may put them off eating this food in the future.

## **Things to try at meal times:**

- Provide your child's preferred foods at **regular meal times**. Don't put new foods on their plate.

- Your child may benefit from **distraction** during meal times such as having the TV, music, or tablet on.



- Your child may benefit from **eating in a different environment** or at different times to others. Different smells and sounds are all part of our sensory

experience and this can be increased around meal times. Some children benefit from eating in a calmer environment, with reduced noise and smells.

- **Having set times for meals.** If your child's plate is not empty by the end of a meal time and they are not interested in eating more, take their plate away without drawing attention to it.



## Other ideas to consider:

If new foods are presented you could:

- Do this out with regular meal times.
- Put the new foods/not regularly accepted foods on a separate plate.
- If your child doesn't show interest or doesn't eat it, it can be helpful to model eating it yourself. Be aware that not all children will tune into this but it does no harm to try.
- Sometimes new places can provide good opportunities to introduce new foods. It may be that you can try offering a different version of your child's preferred food. For example, a different brand.

- Play games with your child and food. This can involve touching, seeing, and smelling new foods. Distract them from the foods which they are playing with.



- Relaxation and calming strategies built into the day to reduce distress can help.
- If you have previously been given advice from occupational therapists in relation to sensory experiences we ask that you continue to follow these recommendations.

**A word of caution: Hiding things such as vegetables in sauces can help some children eat more vegetables. If your child is extremely anxious about food, has a very limited diet, and you have concerns around their weight, we wouldn't recommend this.**



Finally, we ask that everyone around your child is patient with their eating difficulties. We all have likes and dislikes around food. Some people cannot be in the same room where particular foods are being prepared or eaten. It may be that your child has many of these experiences daily and that must be quite stressful for them. Feel free to share this information sheet with family members who provide support to your child.





## **Drinks regularly**

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## **Food or drinks they have tried or shown some interest in, but don't eat often**

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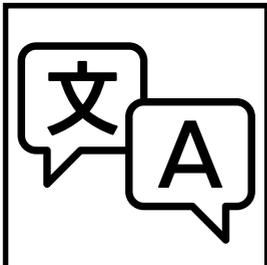
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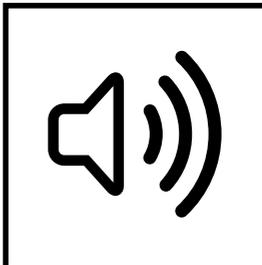
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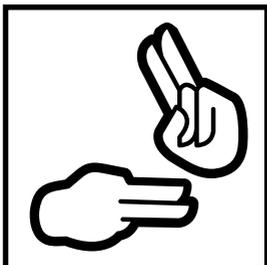
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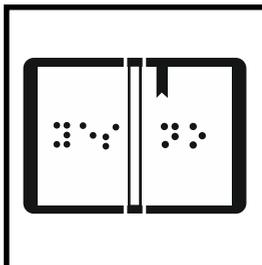
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