Eating and ASD

Some autistic children have fussy eating or selective eating habits. This means children eat only a limited range of food. If your child has fussy eating habits, it's good to understand why. This can help you manage your child's eating behaviour.

Selective eating might be because your child:

- has sensory sensitivities and prefers food with particular textures
- likes routines and wants the same food at the same time every day
- is more focused on how food looks than how it tastes and wants the food presented in the same way every day
- finds it hard to try new experiences, including eating new food

Some autistic children's fussy eating habits are caused often by gastrointestinal problems. So it's always best to speak with your child's GP or paediatrician if your child has gastrointestinal symptoms, like slow weight gain or tummy pain.

Encouraging FOOD EXPLORATION

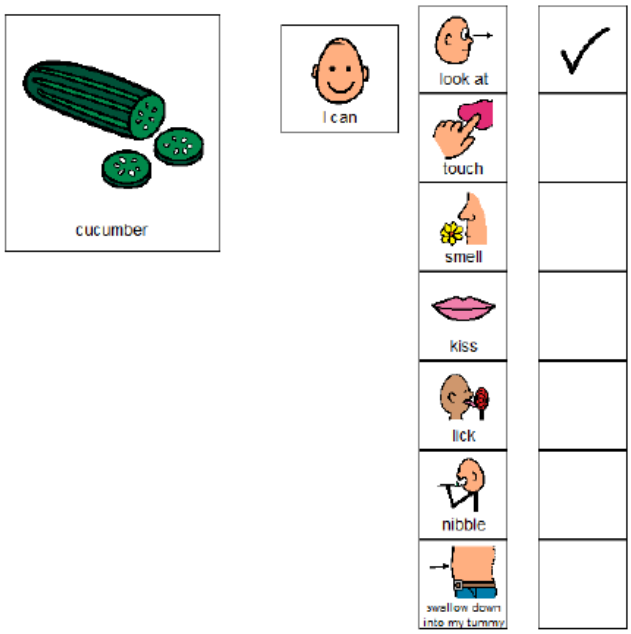
Taster food follow six stages to eating: Tolerates, Interacts with, Smells, Touches, Tastes, Eats. This approach allows your child to interact with and learn about foods in a playful, non-stressful way. It helps increase a child's comfort level by exploring different properties of the foods, including the colour, shape, texture, smell and taste.

Types of foods' textures

1. Hard textured food for exploring (carrot stick, crackers, pitta bread).
2. Meltable hard solids that have a defined texture on the exterior, but melt in the mouth in saliva (wosits, frozen fruit).
3. Soft exterior needs only tongue/munching pressure to break it apart (avocado, banana).
4. Soft exterior that holds a shape, needs munching/grind pressure to break apart (soft meats, pastas, cooked eggs, white breads).
5. Mixed textures of above (macaroni and cheese, fish fingers).
6. Hard textured food that needs grinding to break apart; and foods that tend to shatter in the mouth (cheerios, steak).

These qualities are explored by the child in different foods, using "play with purpose" activities, encouraging them to progress along the six steps to eating.

Sensory stages to food acceptance



Tips about mealtimes

- Role modelling – eat with your child.
- Discuss the food by colour/feature/taste/size (i.e., “The juice is cold!”).
- Try to structure your meal and snack times. Create a routine to meals and snacks (i.e., sit at table, eat, clean up). Try to not overwhelm your child and present only three foods at a time, making sure there is one highly preferred food at every meal.
- Gives them verbal praise.
- Gradual Introduction to foods in a playful, non-stressful way.
- Let your child explore the food in order to make it more motivating. For example, if your child is working on eating yogurt, use your finger to draw a picture or letter in it in order to make it more fun!

Things to remember

- Avoid to force feeding or extreme pressure to eat.
- Withholding preferred foods until ‘tried’ new food.
- Using preferred foods as rewards or ‘first/then’.
- Leaving long gaps between meals to induce hunger.