



Empower Autism

Mealtimes and Food

Many children (with and without autism) struggle with various aspects of eating and mealtimes. Here are some common food-related issues, and some practical tips for supporting positive change in this realm. Regardless of the specific eating issue, most children benefit from structured mealtimes and a variety of foods. Setting up structured mealtimes is usually the first step towards correcting almost all eating issues.

Mealtime Structure

A good structured meal:

- Occurs at roughly the same time of day each day
- Is predictable (on a visual schedule, with a transition warning) and pleasant (no fighting, or yelling, harsh noises, bright lights etc)
- Happens in the same place in the house (preferably at a table-or a coffee table, or a picnic sheet on the floor, or a small kids table)
- Happens with the eater sitting down
- Has few distractions (no TV, no toys etc)

Many household changes take some getting used to (for you and your child). If you feel frazzled on the first day or two—don't worry! Practice structuring meal times for several weeks, and see how you feel when it is a more automatic routine for your family. If your child cannot come and sit down at the table, you will have to practice that skill separately before you can expect to have a seated meal time.

Common Food Related Issues

Not Eating Enough

1. Start by structuring mealtimes (see above) and stating your expectations of how much the child should eat: "I want you to eat half a sandwich and an apple". Use visual explanations when possible.
2. Limit snacks like chips and granola bars during the day so your child is hungry at mealtimes when there is nutritious food available
3. Limit juice and other beverages (such as soda or tea) during the day. These can be filling, but not nutritious
4. Consider rewarding your child (see our rules and rewards handout) for finishing their portion of food
5. Think about what the child is doing before the meal. If they are doing a preferred activity (to give you time to cook), they may not want to stop doing it to eat. Consider transitioning them to something less preferred and then moving to the mealtime
6. Don't offer other food for several hours after a meal

Eating Too Much

1. Start by structuring mealtimes (see above) and stating your expectations of how much the child should eat: “I want you to eat only half a sandwich and an apple”. Use visual explanations when possible.
2. Portion foods onto plates before the meal begins, and put the rest of the food away.
3. Set expectations about portions when going out to eat using our ‘Managing Behavior’ handout.
4. Plan a distracting and fun activity planned for after the meal. When the child is finished with their portion, transition them quickly to the new activity

Limited Foods (no variety)

If a child is eating an extremely limited diet (only 1 or 2 foods), or has extreme reactions to new foods (such as vomiting) please ask your doctor to refer you for formal treatment regarding food variety. This handout is a guideline for children who strongly prefer a few favorite foods, but who might be convinced through parental behavior change to try new foods.

1. Start by structuring mealtimes.
2. Start exposing your child to new foods in a variety of ways, depending on their level of tolerance. You can talk about new foods, look at photos of new foods, model eating new foods, prepare new foods, get your child to help you prepare, pass, or serve new foods to others.
3. Experiment with fixing their favorite foods in slightly different ways
4. Tell your child you will start giving them a small portion (2 bites) of a new food on their plate, but they do not have to try it. They do have to leave it on their plate.
5. Consider offering an incentive to trying new foods (see our managing behavior handout)
6. Don’t offer other foods for several hours after a meal