

Is My Child Eating Right?

Advice for Parents of Children with Autism



As a parent, you will know that children can be fussy eaters and that stubbornness over certain foods is very common. For children with autism (and their parents) this can become a real problem.

Eating a healthy diet is a really important part of physical wellbeing – we need it in order to grow, fight off illness and be healthy and strong. If your child isn't eating well, they may not be able to function at an optimum level and this can lead to problems both at home and at school.

Some autistic children have a very limited diet with little variation. They may struggle to cope with the smell, texture and taste of particular foods and simply avoid eating them. Others may struggle to control their appetite and overeat.

Of course, every child is different but maybe you recognise some of these issues:

- Tantrums and meltdowns at mealtimes.
- Getting anxious over new foods – whether they're being eaten by someone else, seen in a supermarket or just present in the home.
- Being nauseated by the smell of some foods, or when eating a new food (if they can be convinced to try it).
- Refusing to eat items from one or more food groups, such as avoiding dairy or eating only sugar-rich foods.
- Refusing to eat certain textures, such as crunchy foods or soft foods.
- Developing an obsession with particular flavours – often salty or sweet – which makes a healthy and balanced diet much harder to follow.

- Wanting either very strong tasting or very bland food.
- Not wanting different foods on the plate to come into contact with each other.
- Needing foods to be a specific colour (often brown or beige)

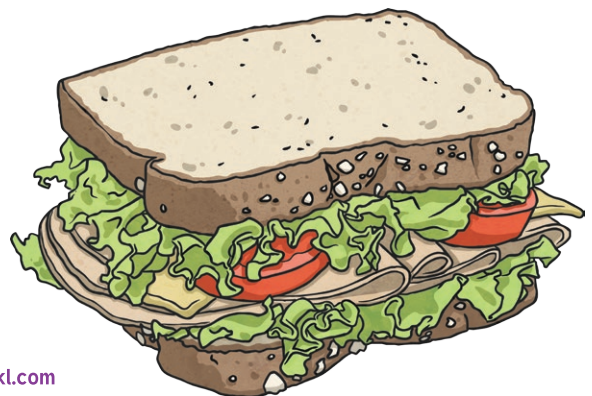
Why Won't My Child Eat?

There are many reasons why a child won't eat. A good starting point is for you to keep an eye on the types of food they like and dislike. Try to work out whether it is the quantity or variety (or both) of food eaten which causes a problem for your child. Once you've done this, you can identify what underlying problems, or sensory issues, may be involved.

Start by keeping a note of what your child is eating, and when. Keeping a food diary can make you aware of the extent of the issue: perhaps your child is eating more or less than you first thought.

Ask yourself some questions:

- What did they eat?
- When did they eat?
- Where did they eat?
- Who were they with?
- How much did they eat?



What Can I Do?

Talk to your child and help them understand why they need food. Be calm, consistent and clear in what it is you are telling your child.

Use **social stories** to help you explain the following:

- We need food for fuel to give us energy so that we can go to school and play with our friends.
- We need to eat different food groups in order to have a healthy diet in order to grow and strengthen.
- If we don't eat properly, we can become tired and sick
- Different foods have different vitamins and minerals in them and they help us stay healthy.
- Use pictures of different foods and explain to your child what each of them is and how they can help stay healthy.

Plan your meals in advance and show your child the menu for the day so that they are prepared for the different foods. List the times of the different meals next to the food and explain to your child when the meals are. Develop a routine and stick to it as closely as possible.

Many autistic children need routine and repetition. They may need to have meals at the same time every day, sitting in the same place at the table, or always use the same plate or cutlery.

When you find it difficult to communicate with other people, it can be difficult to choose what you'd like to eat and let other people know. It's also hard to express that you're hungry or that you've had enough. Develop a subtle cue, or use visual aids such as gauges and pictures, for your child to let you know how they're feeling

non-verbally.

Children with autism can be either hypersensitive or under-sensitive to certain sensations and this is also true with food. It could be that your child's mouth is sensitive and they may only be able to stand bland or soft food. Equally, it could be that your child's mouth-sensations are dulled and they may require very strong-tasting or crunchy foods to give them sensations and stimulation.

There are other factors such as the temperature, smell and texture of the food that could impact on whether or not your child will want to eat it.

Some final things to bear in mind:

- Be aware of your child's needs and whether they have hyper or under sensitivity.
- Try adjusting food to improve the sensory impact. You could purée certain foods or dye them using food colouring. Try making healthy smoothies if your child is happy with the taste and texture.
- Introduce a new food or textures in small steps - let your child examine it (touch, smell) at their own pace to overcome any sensitivity.
- Make sure that food is cooked the way your child likes it - do they like their food over-cooked or under-cooked?

Remember:

You are not alone. If food and eating become too much of an issue speak to your health visitor or doctor or contact a local autism support group.

