

## Approach to Fussy Feeders

Many children with sensory integrative difficulties present with fussy feeding and this can be a cause of concern for parents due to the stress that mealtimes bring as well as the nutritional implications of a restricted diet.

There are 2 main areas that may be leading to the fussy feeding. Firstly your child may have tactile or olfactory sensitivities resulting in negative responses to certain smells or textures of foods either on their lips, on their hands (if they are finger feeding or messy eaters) or in their mouths. The second is poor oral motor control that leads to difficulty chewing and swallowing certain types of foods and this may lead to a gag response and again result in a negative response to food as the child is unsure how he/she will cope with the new or different food presented. If your child presents with these symptoms the following professional may be able to assist you

1. Occupational Therapist (trained in sensory integration) - help with the tactile sensitivities and messy eating
2. Speech and language therapist - help with the oral motor control for chewing and swallowing
3. Dietician - help with nutritional supplements as well as selecting nutritional foods that your child will currently cope with eating

Despite the reason for the fussy feeding, your child will possibly have developed aversion to certain types of foods and may be resistant to trying new foods even once the cause of the problem has been dealt with due to learnt reactions as a result of negative past experiences with food. Some strategies to try at home to introduce new foods include:

### **Oral Defensiveness**

Games and Activities to De-sensitize the Oral Space and improve oral motor control (muscle tone) that can be done at home include

- Encourage the child to explore their mouth with their own hands. If tolerated, rub the inside of their mouth with your fingertips (with gloves)
- Introduce oral toys into play. Examples include, rubber toys, teething rings (different temperatures and textures). You can also buy teething rings that vibrate when the child bites on them.

- Rub the gums and oral area with a warm washcloth using firm pressure. Firm rubbing and deep pressure generally calm and desensitize and therefore increase tolerance to touch sensations. You can buy a baby toothbrush set from a pharmacy with different sized and textured tips. Apply pressure with washcloth or toothbrush tip firstly to the upper palate of the mouth and gradually (depending on the child's response) apply to the lips, cheeks, gums and tongue.
- A regular toothbrush which we use the normal way plus brushing across his tongue and the sides of his mouth. The suggestion of the electric toothbrush would work too.
- Blow toys may assist in de-sensitizing the oral space whilst increase oral-muscle-tone. Some examples include: harmonicas, blowing bubbles, pin wheels, hooters, balloons, ball blowers, whistles, blow pens, bubble gum. Other games include: blowing through a straw or bath into soapy water to make bubbles, blowing a ping-pong ball through a straw around an obstacle course.
- Sucking activities - These promote oral motor development. Try sucking lollipops, drinking through a straw (try different types of straws, start narrow and short and grade to thicker and longer.) Try sucking pureed fruit through a straw
- Gradually introduce small amounts of food into activities. For example, dipping a lollipop into pureed fruit, dipping rubber toys or toothbrush into juice. Help the child be more comfortable with hands/ toys/ foods being in or near their mouth.

## **Tolerating foods**

The first step to introducing new foods is to get your child to tolerate the food being in their environment. In severe cases this may begin with them simply tolerating the food in the same room as them, then progress to having the food on the same table and slowly increase the proximity of the food to the child. It is important not to give your child further negative reactions to food and therefore you may need to work slowly and build up their trust by removing the food if they are having difficulty tolerating it in the environment. Be aware of the smell of the foods as children are often more sensitive to food smells than other odours - start with less intense smelling foods first.

## **Interacting with food**

Once your child is able to tolerate food in their near environment the next step is to get them to interact with the food. Have 2 plates on the table, one for trying and the other for eating. Get your child to dish the new food on to either plate of their choice using utensils so that they are interacting with the food. Alternatively they can pour soup or yogurt etc between jugs or into bowls even if they are not going to be willing to taste the food yet. Once they are happy interacting with food using utensils food can begin to be explored using tips of fingers, then the finger pads, then the whole hand. It is often important for the child to be comfortable with food on their skin before they will tolerate

it on their lips so where appropriate (generally with finger foods) let your child explore the texture of the food with their hands. If this step is necessary it is advisable to let them play with food in a different environment to where meal times take place.

### **Tasting food**

Once your child is comfortable interacting with food they may start to choose to place foods onto their eating plate rather than the trying plate. When they do this let them start to taste the food by simply placing it against their lips and then remove the food so they can lick their lips and taste the food. Slowly work up to placing food on the tip of the tongue to taste and then remove, then let them bite off a small piece of food and if necessary let them spit it out into a 'all done bowl' but gradually encourage them to keep the food in their mouth for longer periods until they are happy to chew and eat the food. Always offer the food you are eating for them to explore. Talk about it with them, e.g. "It's soft, hot, green, etc."

A helpful tip is that it generally takes 10 tries of any new food to be able to decide whether or not you like a food or not, so once your child is happy to taste and chew food encourage them that they need to try it 10 times before they can refuse to have the food again. Remember the goal is not to get your child to eat all foods as we all have taste and texture preferences but to get them to eat a wide variety of acceptable and nutritious foods as well as be willing to try new foods with relative ease.

### **Adapting and Introducing New Food**

Other tips for introducing new food into your child's diet include

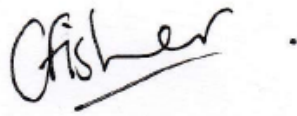
- Prepare the child adequately prior to meals. Make the environment as stress-free as possible. You may want to turn lights lower than usual, minimize loud or distracting noises, maybe use a background sound of soft music. You may find that if you spend a few minutes before the feeding massaging your child so he/she will be more relaxed at feeding time.
- Try ensure that your child is hungry at meal times by limiting snacks between meals and making sure he/she doesn't fill up on water or juice right before a meal.
- Consider other factors such as: Does your child need a puppet/favourite character to help them model eating? Would it help to place a mirror in front of them to see where their mouth is? Is the seating comfortable and positioning appropriate so that they do not slip out or slump? Can the mealtime be structured with the rest of the family so that the child can see appropriate eating being modelled as well as see mealtimes as good family bonding times?
- It is important to de-sensitize the mouth and oral space prior to meal times. Rubbing inside the mouth with a warm wash cloth along with a variety of blowing and sucking games can help to prepare the child for eating and assist them in tolerating textures.
- Offer the child bland-tasting foods. Unwanted taste can be an assault on the senses of an orally defensive child. While some orally defensive children may develop a preference for foods that are slightly sweet, or foods with a particular flavour, they

will most likely not want a wide variety of different tastes and they will not want foods with more powerful flavours or smells, particularly in the early stages of therapy

- Try mixing foods that the child will eat with **very** small amounts of a new food.
- The child is seated and encouraged to touch the food or utensils (if this is possible). Then the feeder touches the lips or face to indicate that the food is on the way. A cue such as squeezing the hand, or saying "here's another bite", could be given before each spoonful. As the meal continues, a regular rhythm of food presentation may provide the necessary cues. If the routine is followed at each meal, the child can anticipate the arrival of the food and is not startled when it reaches the mouth.
- Use utensils that are consistent and tolerated by the child. Often the use a spoon that is coated with rubber or vinyl if the child tends to bite on the spoon or has problems with taste or temperature. The coating protects the teeth and reduces the intensity of taste and temperature sensations.
- Use fruit, mashed potatoes, dehydrated cereal, fruit or vegetable flakes, gelatin, arrow root powder, or a commercial thickener to thicken liquid if the child has trouble drinking. When the liquid is thicker (milkshake consistency), you have better control of a small amount. The liquid doesn't move as quickly so the child has better control. Thin liquid (like milk and juice) often splashes into the airway if the child has swallowing problems.
- Add enough moisture to foods to ensure they are manageable in the mouth.
- Food is better tolerated on the front or middle of the tongue rather than the back.
- Provide **immediate, specific** positive praise for attempts at trying new foods. They may be rewarded with a spoonful of a favourite food or a sticker for a star chart. After eating, praise the child for whatever success they had.
- Link new foods to those already in the child's diet. Describe how they are similar e.g. "same temperature" "same crunchiness" "same hardness"
- Progress from smooth/pureed through to coarse/chewy then eventually solid/hard foods. Your speech therapist will be able to guide you in this process particularly if your child is having difficulty chewing certain types of foods due to oral motor control difficulties
- During eating: Do not present all foods at once. Instead, present them one at a time. When your child gestures or says that they are all done with that food, clear all of it away from the table, hands and mouth with a wash cloth before going onto the next food.
- Maintain a fun and playful atmosphere during meal times

I hope that this information is helpful. If you need any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards



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