

Nutrition and Dietetics

Feeding advice for children with autism who have restricted eating

Restricted eating is common in children who are on the Autistic spectrum. The level of restriction often goes way beyond picky or fussy eating. This leaflet will suggest ways of tackling various aspects of children's restricted eating

Getting the basics right:

These suggestions are really important. Getting these right will enable the child to move forward with their eating. Children are **not** likely to improve their eating without these basics in place.

- Never force the child to eat – this always makes the problem worse.
- Keep calm. Pretend you do not mind them not eating even if you do.
- If the child never sits with you to eat, show them that you have a pleasant and relaxed time eating. Gentle encouragement to get them to join you, even for a short time is progress. There should be no expectation of the child eating if they don't normally.
- If the child does sit with you but is a slow eater do not let the first course take over 20 minutes.
- Offer pudding even if the first course is not touched. All food is good food.
- Do not comment on any uneaten food.
- Try to eat in a relaxed environment. Avoid having the TV, radio or music on at meal times.
- Offer food regularly, about every two hours. Three meals each day and snacks between meals.

Nutrition

We recommend that the child has a multivitamin and mineral preparation. There are a variety of different ones from liquids to chewy types. Choose one that you think your child may like.

Constipation and reflux

These problems are more common in children with autism and treating them will often help. If you think that the child may have these problems ask your GP, consultant or



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dietitian for advice.

When the basics described above, are in place decide on one of the following sections to work on.

Increasing the range of foods that the child will eat

- Children with autism are often most comfortable eating a specific food. If you always provide this exactly, they will have a natural tendency to reduce the number of foods they eat. It is really important that you continue to give them foods that are slightly different and not always an exact match to their preferred food. This prevents further restriction of foods that they will eat and will help improve the range of foods that are acceptable to them.
- Increasing variety within a single food.

Example 1 - Jack likes a particular large white sliced bread, medium cut. The following slight variations were suggested. Jack tried the item most acceptable to him first. After the initial item Jack went on to try the others from this list.

Small loaf, same bread

Same brand but thick or thin sliced

Unsliced bread

Pitta bread

Ciabatta

Pizza bases

Rolls

½ and ½ white and wholemeal

French sticks

Example 2 - Amy will only eat first stage stewed apple and custard baby jar. (She is 5 years old.)

The same flavour, but a different make was tried.

Then a powder version was tasted.

Next a tiny amount of apple sauce (the tip of a teaspoon) was added into the pudding.

Finally a tiny amount of custard or yoghurt was added to the pudding.

To encourage the child to eat a new food there are two suggestions:

1. If the child loves a particular food let the child know that you will expect them to eat a tiny amount of a new food first (The amount can be miniscule). Do this at every meal, with the same new food and the same amount. Once the child is doing this regularly increase the amount of new food given. This can be increased again once the child accepts the new amount at each meal.

- The starting point may be smelling the food regularly.
- Move to touching the food with their finger and smelling
- Putting their finger to their lips.
- Putting a spoon into their mouth with the same food on it.
- Continue with small stages.

2. If the child loves a particular food of a suitable texture tell the child that you are mixing in a tiny amount of a new food. This can be done to the whole meal or a small amount of meal taken out to have the new food added which needs to be eaten first. Slowly increase the amount of new food added. This can even be a savoury added to a sweet food. Eventually the child will be eating the new food.

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Recognising what textures and types of food the child is eating

List the foods that the child will eat, then describe each of the textures and colours.

- Crunchy, soft, dry, wet, sloppy
- White, beige or any orange colours etc.
- Do they eat different textures, but separately? For example: they will eat crunchy cereal and drink milk, but not together.

Once you have this information try to work within the child's preferences. Find other similar foods.

For children who need to increase their weight

- Having sufficient energy for growth is more important than healthy eating where children are underweight.
- In autism where restricted eating can be extreme, it is important to give the child the food that they will eat regularly. This sometimes means children only eating one food such as chocolate or yoghurt for days at a time. This will mean that they will need to eat the food at break times at school.
- Poor food intake and poor weight gain is often the cause of parental anxiety. This can be picked up by the child and can make the problem worse. Try to stay calm and work through the suggestions in this sheet.
- If you are able to add extra foods such as butter or sugar to your child's diet, look at the Information sheet "How to gain weight in children" (Available from the Health Information Centre Telephone 024 7696 6051)
- If you need further information and advice please ask your GP for a referral to the Dietetic Department.

Reference:

Professional Consensus Statement on Dietary Management of Autism Spectrum Disorder

<http://www.bda.uk.com/publications/statements/DietaryManagementAutism.pdf>

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Document History

Author	Beverley Spicer
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Published	March 2013
Reviewed	April 2014, April 2016, Aug 2018
Review	Aug 2021
Version	4
Reference No	HIC/LFT/1581/13