

INTRODUCTION

Proper nutrition, a healthy balanced diet, and eating a variety of foods are of concern for those supporting individuals on the autism spectrum. Parents worry about a child who eats very few foods, never want fruits or vegetables, or eats from only one food group like carbohydrates. Educators feel concerned when they see a student eating processed foods at school which can result in energy spikes and crashes.

Some individuals have specific eating styles like grazing, food has to be presented and served in a specific way, and only certain colors, smells or textures are accepted. Eating times can be erratic or sporadic throughout the day. Food jags are also common where only one food is eaten for a period of time.

Oral motor function comes in to play as eating itself is a complex process. Eating involves how the mouth muscles function: how strong the muscles are, how well they coordinate the range of motion and how far they can move as they manipulate food in the mouth. Sensory oral-motor aspects around eating involve how the mouth tissues perceive sensory information such as the taste, temperature and texture of food.

Interoceptive awareness must also be considered as this eighth sense is the one that tells us when we are hungry, thirsty or full. The interoceptive sense may be impaired and directly related to eating difficulties. There are ways to improve the function of this sense.

Gut inflammation is a reality for many individuals on the spectrum as well as food intolerances. If a child has gut pain but cannot express what is wrong due to interoception impairment or communication difficulties, we may see challenging behaviors such as sleep issues, mood swings, emotional outbursts, or periods of high energy and not understand the reason why.

The subject of food is fraught with emotion because it's impossible to make a person eat something they do not want to. It is also a misconception to think a person will eat if they are hungry enough no matter what it served – this is usually not the case. Individuals on the spectrum may experience strong emotions such as fear and anxiety about food.

Whether in the supportive role of parent, caregiver, educator or support worker, it is important to recognize eating difficulties, understand and accept them, and find solutions to foster good eating habits and nutrition. A healthy diet with a wide variety of foods can take a long time to achieve, but it is worth working towards. Good health and well-being are the primary goals around eating.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



FEEDING CHALLENGES AND FOOD AVERSIONS

HELPFUL HINTS FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Picky eating habits are one of the most common complaints from parents of children with autism. Challenges can range from a limited diet where a child will only eat from a few food groups (like only meat and grains), overeating or not eating enough, oral motor difficulties that prevent proper chewing and processing of food, to sensory issues around food such as texture or colour, and digestive issues. Many parents find mealtimes frustrating, and become concerned about their child's nutrition, health and overall well-being due to feeding problems. Below is a list of some of the best tips I have learned over two decades of mealtimes with my two children on the spectrum:

- 1. Keep mealtimes calm and stress-free.** Avoid eating in a hurry or on the go, or feeling frustrated by how meals “generally” seem to go. Try to budget enough time for a relaxed atmosphere. That is not always easy when you are a busy family!
- 2. Set a routine for mealtimes.** Individuals with ASD thrive on routine so create a set plan around mealtimes that is consistent and predictable. Choose a regular time and place for eating as much as possible.
- 3. Create a visual plan around mealtime.** Some children feel anxious about when an activity will end so show them the steps of eating a meal and let them know when they will be finished. If you can, involve your child in food preparation so they become part of the meal preparation process. This creates a predictable routine and involves the child in the meal process.
- 4. If your child prefers to eat alone, investigate the reason for this.** I know one adult on the spectrum who cannot tolerate the sound of other people chewing so she can only join her family for meals if she is wearing noise-cancelling headphones.
- 5. Teach rules around food serving sizes if you have a child who over-eats.** For example, our son used to sneak a bag of his gluten-free cookies and eat them all in one sitting. We taught him a serving size was 6 cookies and he now follows that rule by counting them out and placing them in a bowl.
- 6. Look for signs of food intolerances.** Things like a bloated stomach, diarrhea, changes in bowel movements (frequency, color or smell), headaches, constipation, sleep disturbances, or acid reflux are not normal parts of healthy digestion, and may be a sign of food sensitivity. There may be a physical cause for your child’s avoidance of certain foods.
- 7. If you do suspect there are food intolerances, keep a food journal so problem foods can be identified.** It can be hard to track what foods are causing issues, and sometimes it’s not one food but combinations. Keep a journal and then take that with you to your doctor. Also, consider visiting a dietician if there are food intolerances, or you suspect food intolerances. In our case, it was a dietician who discovered our children needed to follow a gluten-free/casein-free diet. They have been on this diet since they were a year old, before they were diagnosed with autism.
- 8. Allow time to explore new foods.** When introducing a new food, allow the child time to explore it and get used to it being on the plate. It takes approximately 20 exposures to a new food before a child will try that food.