



Managing Eating Difficulties with Autism

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Objective

- Underlying issues to food refusal.
- Assessing and understanding why your child might have a feeding issue
- Some practical strategies on increasing variety of foods





Who Is a *Picky* Eater

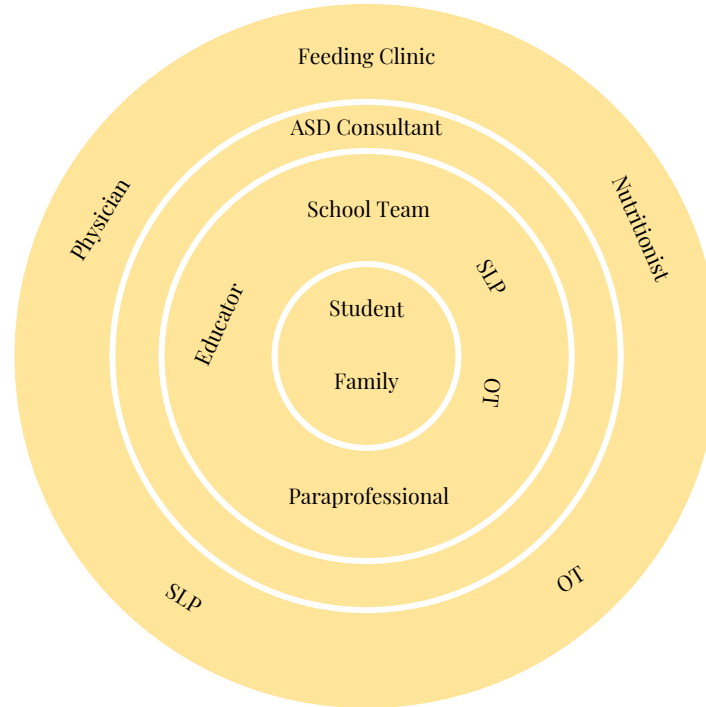


- Eat less than 20 foods
- Eat fewer and fewer foods over time until they are limited to about 5- 10 foods they will eat
- Refuse foods of certain textures altogether
- None acceptance of new foods on their plate (won't even touch)
- Cry, scream, gag, vomit and tantrum upon presentation of new foods
- Are unwilling to try a new food
- Rigidity and need for routine/sameness around food



Figure 1. Team collaboration for the child with autism spectrum disorder and feeding difficulties

Underlying issues



Rule out any medical issues (primary care, para-professional, specialist

- Mechanics
- Physiological concerns
- Swallowing
- Restricted food interests
- Nutritional concern

Note: SLP = Speech Language Pathologist; OT = Occupational Therapist



Behavior Assessments

- Assessment of factors to emphasize for children with ASD:
- Direct assessment of food selectivity and/or food refusal.
- Assessment of unsafe eating behaviors (overstuffing food in mouth, swallowing food without chewing).
- Assessment of patterns of consistency or inconsistency in performance (generalization across environments)



Results

Texture

Visual

Smell

Taste

Other



Change The *Environment*

- Eating should be pleasant and enjoyable
- Pick a time when your Child is calm
- Schedule mealtimes and food introduction
- Try to make mealtime as stress free as possible
- Remove distractions (TV, toys video games etc)
- Provide choices in how you present food
- Incorporate visual schedule



Three *Strategies* to Try at home

- Pairing Preferred And Non-preferred Foods With A Token System
- Desensitization
- Food Chaining



Pairing *Preferred and Non- preferred* Foods with a Token System

- Select a non-preferred target food
- Pair the preferred food with non-preferred food
- Reward acceptance of non-preferred food with preferred food
- You can try to include token system
- Remember have patience, proceed at your child's pace



Desensitization

- Make a list of favorite foods and drinks
- Present these foods during preferred activities
- Have your child explore the food using different senses and activities (feeding a doll, preparing lunch, touching the food, smelling the food)
- Introduce sitting at the designated eating area without expectation of eating
- Food can touch different parts of his body until gradually starts touching the face
- Once food touches lip then have them lick, bite, chew and eventually swallow
- No force feeding (then you will have to start all over)
- Provide lots of social praise and other reinforcement



Food Chaining

Level 1

Maintain & expand,
current taste &
texture

Level 2

Vary taste,
maintain texture

Level 3

Maintain taste,
vary texture

Level 4

Vary taste, vary
texture



Conclusion

- Educate yourself
- Talk about the food experience
- Offer small nutritious foods
- Involve them in preparation if possible (sensory)
- Small steps



References

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- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Exploring%20Feeding%20Behavior.pdf>
 - cardusf.fmhi.usf.edu/resources/materials/docs/CARD_FeedingAversionsBrochure_FINAL-HR.PDF