

## **BUILDING BLOCKS® Early Intervention Service** **Parent Information Sheet**

### **Selective Eating Habits**

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Many children with an autism spectrum disorder have unusual eating habits. They may only eat savoury, soft or crunchy food, or they may enjoy one type of food for some time, and then suddenly lose interest in eating it. Some children are not motivated by food and it is a constant struggle to get them to eat even a limited variety of foods. The first step is to determine what food your child appears comfortable with and then to try to establish some form of routine or pattern around mealtimes.

### **Strategies which may assist**

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- When offering new foods, give only very small portions and offer one favourite food with something new and untried.
- Limit the amount of sweet or fast foods your child is given.
- Check whether your child's preference is related to **texture**. If so introduce new textures very gradually.
- Keep offering different foods even if your child doesn't try them or even notice them,
- **Try presenting foods in different ways.** For example making a face on a piece of bread e.g. with lettuce for hair, a piece of carrot for a mouth and sultanas as eyes may make the food more appealing to your child. Alternatively you could try presenting foods to your child in different ways, e.g. cut a star-shaped sandwich or diamond-shaped meat, or grating carrot or cheese instead of presenting it in large pieces. Another idea is to try juicing vegetables and fruits or using commercially available fruit and vegetable juices.
- Try eating in **different locations** as sometimes children will try different foods in alternative situations eg. having a picnic, or eating outside, including some less favoured foods in your child's lunchbox for pre-school.

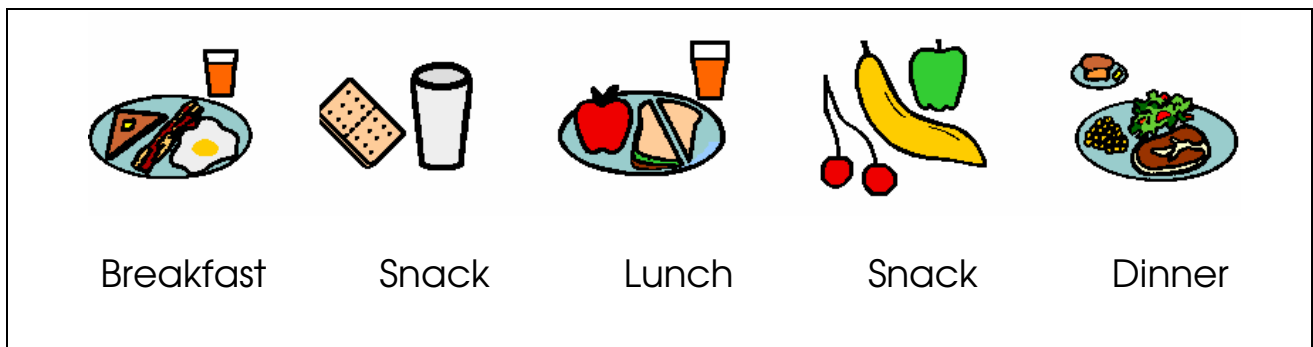
- Try using favourite TV characters as motivators e.g. Thomas the Tank or Bananas in Pajamas plates or cups.
- Collect data on food and liquid intake during the day to determine any changes in your child's diet

- Introduce some rules into the eating sequence. **The first rule is that children should sit at the table to eat or drink.** It is a good idea to have a small table and chairs available and encourage your child to sit down before you offer any food. If he leaves the table you merely say "You've finished" and remove the food or drink. If he returns, then replace the food and drink.



- Try eating together as a family.
  - Step 1** Place one spoonful of what the family is eating on a plate in front of your child
  - Step 2** Don't feed him or even encourage him to eat
  - Step 3** Give no attention, even if your child throws the food off his plate- Ignore it!
  - Step 4** Praise your child for "good sitting"
  - Step 5** When the family has finished eating, then remove the child's plate and give him a small portion of his usual food. Make no fuss or comment about what has been eaten or left.
- Alternatively you could place a small portion of the family's food on the same plate as his favoured food and ignore his eating. Remove the food left on the plate at the end of the meal and make no comments.
- In some cases a child may refuse a food because he enjoys watching the reaction caused by his refusal to eat, rather than because he dislikes the food in question. This is often particularly true with vegetables, because parental reaction to refusal to eat these foods is often so strong.
- Ignore any power games – don't react to the child's refusal to eat.
- Try putting serving dishes on the table and encourage your child to serve himself or help him to do so.
- If he chooses nothing, then he is left with an empty plate. It should only take a few meals where everyone else is eating for the child to decide to select some food. This way you aren't forcing him to eat, and if he eats nothing it is his choice.

- Don't worry if your child misses a meal- he may feel hungry during the day. If he gets upset, offer some fruit but not sweets, biscuits or left-over food from the last meal. Try not to overcome the child's hunger as this will encourage better eating habits at appropriate meal times.
- **The second rule is to try to have set mealtimes.** Try to avoid establishing impossible eating habits for your family with everyone eating at different times.
- If your child demands biscuits, chocolates or chips between meals, remove them from the house completely so that they are no longer available to the child- ensuring that he is not encouraged to snack between meals.
- Use visual strategies to support this process eg. photo schedules or sequence boards.
- See also information on sensory sensitivities, which may be impacting on your child's eating patterns.



- If you have any on-going concerns regarding your child's diet or nutrition, contact your child's paediatrician, or request a referral to a dietician.

Reference:

Dodd, S. Managing Problem Behaviours, 1995, Sydney: Macmillan and Petty.