

# Supporting restrictive or selective eating: a guide for families

Restrictive or selective eating is common and reflects differences in sensory processing and comfort with predictability. With patience, understanding and gentle support, children can gradually expand the foods they feel comfortable eating. This information sheet explains different forms of restrictive eating and tips for supporting children to explore new foods.

**Our purpose**  
**a different brilliant®**

Understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths, interests and aspirations of people on the autism spectrum.

## What is restrictive or selective eating?

Restrictive or selective eating refers to a pattern where a child eats a very limited range of foods or avoids certain foods. This may include reluctance to try new foods, strong preferences for specific textures, colours or brands, or refusal of entire food groups.

Restrictive eating is especially common in Autistic children, with research suggesting that between 46% and 89% of Autistic children experience selective eating. These patterns often begin early in childhood and can continue into later childhood and adulthood, if not supported.

Research shows that restrictive eating is most strongly linked to:

- sensory sensitivities (e.g. sensitivity to texture, taste, temperature, smell or appearance of food)
- need for predictability and routine
- strong preferences for familiar foods and distress with unfamiliar foods.

Many children prefer foods with predictable textures, such as crackers, bread, rice or other "beige" foods, and may avoid foods with mixed textures, lumps or strong flavours.

Importantly, with the right support, children can gradually expand the range of foods they feel comfortable eating.

## What is Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)?

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) is a clinical diagnosis introduced in the DSM-5. It describes a more severe and persistent form of restrictive eating where food avoidance leads to significant health, nutritional or daily functioning difficulties.

Unlike other eating disorders, ARFID is not driven by concerns about body weight or shape. Instead, food avoidance may be related to:

- sensory sensitivities
- fear of negative experiences (e.g. choking, vomiting)
- lack of interest in eating
- strong need for predictability and routine.



ARFID may lead to:

- nutritional deficiencies
- low weight or growth concerns
- reliance on a very small number of foods
- significant distress or difficulty participating in everyday activities involving food.

It is important to note that not all restrictive eating is ARFID. Many children with selective eating are otherwise healthy and gradually expand their food range over time.

If restrictive eating significantly impacts nutrition, growth, health or daily functioning, professional support may be helpful.

## Tips for supporting your child

### 1.

#### Reduce pressure and focus on safety

Children are more likely to explore new foods when they feel calm and safe. Helpful approaches include:

- avoiding force, bribery or punishment
- allowing your child to say “no”
- keeping mealtimes calm and predictable
- focusing on creating positive experiences, not immediate change.

Pressure can increase anxiety and make food avoidance stronger.

### 2.

#### Take small steps toward new foods

Trying new foods is a gradual process. Small steps might include:

- looking at the food
- touching the food
- smelling the food
- bringing it close to the mouth
- trying a very small taste.

Each step builds comfort and confidence.

### 3.

#### Build on foods your child already eats

Start with foods your child already feels comfortable eating (“safe foods”).

You can gradually expand variety by:

- offering foods with similar textures, colours or flavours
- making small changes (e.g. shape, preparation or brand)
- pairing new foods with familiar foods.

This helps make new foods feel safer.

### 4.

#### Support your child’s sensory needs

Many children avoid foods because of sensory experiences, especially texture.

Helpful strategies include:

- offering foods with preferred textures
- allowing foods to stay separate on the plate
- using preferred utensils or plates
- letting your child explore foods with their hands.

Respecting sensory preferences helps children feel safe enough to explore.

### 5.

#### Use encouragement and positive experiences

Positive experiences increase willingness to try foods. You can:

- eat together as a family
- model eating a variety of foods
- involve your child in food preparation
- praise effort, even small steps.

Research shows that positive reinforcement can help increase food acceptance.





## 6.

### Be patient, progress takes time

Restrictive eating often develops over many years and change happens gradually.

Remember that:

- small changes are meaningful progress
- consistency matters more than speed
- set realistic expectations
- focus on long-term comfort and confidence.

## 7.

### Support yourself as a parent

Many parents feel stressed, worried or judged when their child has restrictive eating. These feelings are understandable and common. Steps you can take to support yourself include:

- talking to professionals (e.g. occupational therapists, feeding therapists, dietitians, psychologists)
- connecting with other parents
- remembering that you are not alone.

Supporting yourself helps you support your child.



### Additional resources

#### Autism Awareness Australia:

[autismawareness.com.au/navigating-autism/eating-disorders-and-autism](https://autismawareness.com.au/navigating-autism/eating-disorders-and-autism)

#### Autism Speaks:

[autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/autism-food-refusal-mealtime-tips](https://autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/autism-food-refusal-mealtime-tips)

#### Eating Disorders Victoria:

[eatingdisorders.org.au/eating-disorders-a-z/eating-disorders-and-autism](https://eatingdisorders.org.au/eating-disorders-a-z/eating-disorders-and-autism)

#### National Autistic Society (UK):

[autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/behaviour/eating/all-audiences](https://autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/behaviour/eating/all-audiences)

#### Reframing Autism:

[reframingautism.org.au/understanding-avoidant-restrictive-food-intake-disorder-arfid](https://reframingautism.org.au/understanding-avoidant-restrictive-food-intake-disorder-arfid)

### Based on the idea of a different **brilliant**<sup>®</sup>, Aspect's approach:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.