Help! My child is a tricky eater and avoids trying new food

By Denise Stapleton APD & Gillian Griffiths OT

Do you know a child who struggles to enjoy eating and has an aversion to putting most food in their mouth? Or are you a parent who goes into battle feeding your child? Mealtime problems can be a common toddler trait, but how do you know when it’s more than just a fussy phase? Or that it might progress right through to the teenage years? We asked a dietitian and an occupational therapist who support kids and families with tricky eating. “He won’t eat fruit”. “He will only eat food in packets”. “She has to have the same food in his lunch box every day, all separate and gets upset if one thing touches another”. Do these phrases sound familiar? Do you have a tricky eater?

Eating can seem like a simple behaviour, when in fact one in two infants and toddlers are reported by their parents to have feeding problems. Fussy or picky eating usually passes after a few months, however, mealtimes for some families are fraught with ongoing grimacing, gagging, distress, anxiety, worry, frustration and anger in their children.

What causes mealtime difficulties?

There is a long list of reasons that can trigger things not going to plan and cause a tricky eater. Premature or complicated birth, early hospitalisation, medical or developmental conditions, pain, trauma, excessive stress, reflux, vomiting, ear, throat or chest infections, allergies, intolerances, and constipation are just some of the conditions that can contribute to complex mealtimes. Postnatal depression, anxiety and stress in parents can also contribute to mealtimes becoming tricky for some families.

Think back to a memory of your favourite meal. Where were you, who were you with, what happened, what did you eat, how did you eat it, how did it make you feel and what do you remember?

One of the key areas to explore, in conjunction with a Health Professional assessment, is your child’s sensory preferences for mealtimes.

What are sensory preferences?

Sensory preferences are the sights, sounds, types of touch, smells, tastes, temperatures, textures and types of movement we prefer in our day. Our sensory preferences influence what we detect, tolerate, are distracted or distressed by, avoid, or seek more of.

Sensory preferences are unique to each individual as they are based on: sensory thresholds in the brain; genes; the surrounding; environment; feelings; interactions and experiences during each day and across a lifetime (i.e. memories). On top of this, pain, stress, trauma, fatigue, reflux, vomiting, infections, allergies, intolerances and constipation can make a parent or a child more or less sensitive. Discovering sensory preferences takes time as we may have a different threshold for each sense and the amount of sensory information we avoid, tolerate or seek more of can change during the day. Parents can also project their own sensory preferences onto their children.

Can you remember eating a food that caused you to feel unwell or vomit? Can you tolerate the smell, sight, taste or texture of that food now? How does it make you feel? What would you do if you were forced to eat even just a little bit? How would you behave?

How do sensory preferences affect mealtime behaviour?

During mealtimes we use EVERY sense to help us notice, be calm, interact with others, socialise, be seated, use utensils (or not) and finally to eat. We continually use our senses to gather sensory information from our surroundings and our body in order to ensure our mealtimes are emotionally safe, successful and enjoyable.

Our sensory preferences directly influence our thoughts, feelings, memories, interactions with others and our behaviour. If our brain detects or remembers an experience that feels unsafe, worrisome or dangerous, our body might experience a Danger Centre Response (fight, flight, freeze or fright). These strong feelings might be associated with the sensory properties of certain foods, the surroundings or interactions and can have a very large impact on mealtime behaviour.

How can I help my child feel safe at snack and mealtimes?

You can support your child’s ability to stay calm by taking time to SENSE-itively tune in to his or her cues. When you tune in to your child’s sensory preferences, you can create a ‘just right’ experience that will feel emotionally safe for everyone and hopefully bring pleasure. Ongoing pleasurable mealtimes can positively shape a child’s mealtime behaviour and the types or range of food he will eat. We have had very positive feedback from parents about how our book, Sense-ational Mealtimes, has helped them along this journey.

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