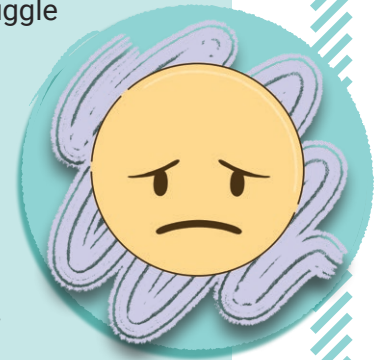


# My Child's Eating Habits: Support Snippet for Parents of Autistic Children

## Why might Autistic children struggle with eating?

For many Autistic children, mealtimes can be extremely challenging:

- A meal can be a sensory adventure with so many different textures, tastes, smells and sights to explore. For Autistic children, certain foods may trigger **sensory overwhelm**.
- Autistic children find comfort in rigid routines. Therefore, they may struggle with **uncertainty** surrounding things such as the timings of meals, how food is prepared and brands of food.
- Mealtimes are often very social aspects of the day, particularly in settings such as schools. Autistic children may feel **socially anxious** about the activity around the dinner table.
- Autistic children may struggle with **interoception**, meaning they may struggle to understand when they are hungry or full-up.
- Some Autistic children who struggle with **emotional regulation** may use food as a way to cope with feelings of distress. For example, they might binge on their favourite food or restrict what they eat.
- If an Autistic child suffers from **digestive issues** (e.g. constipation or IBS), this may affect their appetite or the types of foods they want to eat.
- If an Autistic child is diagnosed with a **feeding disorder** (e.g. ARFID), it may lead to nutritional deficiencies or affect their growth.



## Signs your Autistic child is struggling during mealtimes:

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• struggling to regulate their emotions during mealtimes, e.g. experiencing meltdowns</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• getting upset and worried if new foods are offered to them</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• only eating foods that are a certain colour (e.g. beige)</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• feeling anxious if different foods touch one another on the plate</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• experiencing nausea from the smells of certain foods (e.g. the smell of something cooking)</li></ul>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• refusing to eat food from one or more food groups (e.g. rejecting all dairy products)</li></ul>                         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• avoiding certain textures, e.g. foods that are crunchy or soft</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• struggling with their appetite, e.g. eating too little or too much</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• refusing or struggling to eat in certain settings (e.g. at a friend's house, in the school hall or at a cafe)</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• struggling to eat if sitting alongside other people</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• developing an obsession with particular flavours (e.g. sweet foods) and wanting to eat those foods all the time</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• only eating foods that are a particular brand</li></ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• rejecting foods if they aren't prepared in a particular way (e.g. only eating toast if it's cut into squares)</li></ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• developing a preference for foods that taste very strong or very bland</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• feeling distressed by changes in routine, e.g. if a meal is served at a different time to normal</li></ul>              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• feeling anxious if they need to pick up and eat certain foods with their fingers (e.g. may struggle with the feeling of 'wet' food)</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• getting upset by changes in food packaging</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• experiencing medical issues such as diarrhoea, constipation, fatigue or reflux</li></ul>                                |

## Supporting your Autistic child to develop positive eating habits:

- Always offer 'safe' foods that your child enjoys eating during mealtimes.
- Prepare your child if offering them a new food (e.g. by talking to them and showing them the food in advance).
- Respect your child's choice not to eat or try something, if they really don't want to eat something (even if it is something they have liked before), respect their choice. It is easy for a child to be put off their food, and adding pressure to eat it can make the experience negative.
- If you are going to introduce a new food, present it on a separate plate or bowl so that if your child doesn't want it, they don't feel put off by their whole meal.



- Use social stories to teach your child about the importance of eating and why their body needs food.
- Avoid 'hiding' new foods, e.g. by adding chopped vegetables to a sauce.
- Try to keep mealtimes quiet, calm and relaxed.
- Plan meals in advance and display a weekly menu for your child to read.



- Offer lots of praise if your child finds the confidence to try a new food.
- Avoid putting pressure on your child to eat certain foods to reduce feelings of anxiety.
- Serve their food on a divided plate to keep different types of food separate.
- Keep a food diary to keep track of your child's eating habits: foods they enjoy and foods that trigger anxiety.
- Take your child's sensory needs into account when planning and cooking meals, e.g. if they dislike certain textures or if they need food served at a particular temperature.
- Offer your child an alternative environment to eat their food, e.g. away from the rest of the family.



- Serve their food at an alternative time to other family members, if they prefer to sit at the table alone.
- Consider your child's preferences when preparing their food, e.g. cutting up food a particular way.
- Let your child play with food (e.g. by engaging in messy play) to explore different textures, smells, sights and tastes. It might seem like they are 'just playing' but that might just be their process, for example, they might want to deconstruct their sandwich before eating it.
- If your child thrives with consistency, always offer them the same plate and set of cutlery, and let them sit at the same place around the table.
- Try to serve meals at the same time each day and prepare your child for any changes in routine.



- Avoid taking your child to eat in busy cafes or restaurants if loud noises can lead to sensory overwhelm.
- If your child is struggling with the environment they are eating in, consider the use of sensory aids (e.g. headphones).
- Use visual aids to help your child communicate things such as food choices (e.g. the use of a choice board for snack time).
- Reach out for professional support (e.g. from a GP, paediatrician or dietician), particularly if your child experiences medical issues.



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