

Picky Eaters with ASD

By Teri Jasman



Helping young children develop healthy eating habits is a goal that many parents share. However, this goal is more easily achieved with some children than it is with others. Establishing a healthy and varied diet in children can be a struggle for many parents, especially those of children with ASD. Cajoling, airplane noises, creative food presentations and threats of starvation make no difference to the child who simply won't eat anything that is not on his or her personal "OK list."

Autism affects each child uniquely. Therefore, the reasons for a restricted food repertoire may not be the same for each child with ASD. Some common reasons that children with ASD may reject new foods or may stop eating foods that they have previously eaten include sensory issues (aversions to certain smells or textures), oral defensiveness, food allergies, digestive issues and/or desire for sameness. In some cases, professionals may need to be consulted prior to attempting to expand a child's diet (in order to rule out food allergies for example). In most other cases, however, a systematic behavioral approach to increasing food repertoire will yield results.

The following is an example of a step-by-step approach to integrating a new food into your child's diet. Once the child tolerates a step (i.e., does not cry or become upset) for two meals, move on to the next step. Also, don't forget to reinforce your child (with a desired food or activity) each time he/she demonstrates the targeted behavior.

1. Select a food that is similar to one that the child is already eating, such as a different type of pasta noodle or a different flavor of goldfish cracker.
2. During a snacktime or mealtime, put a small amount of the food on a separate plate next to your child's plate. You can bring your child's attention to the new food by eating some and commenting, "This is yummy."
3. Put the food on the child's plate. He/she does not eat the food but has to tolerate the food being on the plate.
4. Now have your child touch the food. You can model touching the food and have the child imitate you. Have a set number of times that the child is expected to touch the food, so that the expectation is clear. For example, tell the child "we're going to touch 3 times."
5. The next step is to have your child pick up the food. You can make this step more concrete for the child by having a set amount of the food out (5 or 6 noodles for example) and having the child move the food from one dish to another.
6. Now have your child put the food to his or her lips. You can tell your child, "give the food a kiss." Again, have a set number of times that this will be expected during the meal.
7. Step 7 is the same as step 6, but have your child put the food on his/her tongue.
8. Have a set number of very tiny bites of the food out (you may need to start with just one bite and work your way up). Have your child eat the bite(s) of food. Over time, you can increase the size of the bites.

Remember, that it may take weeks or even months to integrate a new food into your child's diet. The more systematic and consistent you are, the easier it will be. Before you know it, your child will actually be asking for foods that you never thought he or she would like.

