

Mealtimes

Sensory processing differences may contribute to challenges during mealtimes. Eating involves all senses: taste, smell, sight, touch, and even hearing. Some children may find the sensory input of certain foods, smells, or the environment overwhelming. Others might seek additional sensory input to feel comfortable eating.

The following ideas are designed to help address these challenges. When using them, consider your child's age, any potential risks and their sensory preferences. Reflect on how to adapt these strategies to best support your child in feeling calm and relaxed during mealtimes.

Area of Difficulty	Strategy	Tick when strategy has been tried and add comments
Child refuses foods due to smell, texture, colour, shape or temperature	Introduce new foods slowly, in small portions, alongside familiar favorites. Offer these new foods but don't force your child to try eating.	
	Provide a separate plate or bowl so your child can remove food they don't want (especially if they throw it). This may help your child to feel less pressure.	
	Model trying new foods by smelling, tasting and talking about the sensory experience without forcing your child to do the same.	
	Consider grading textures by gradually mixing different degrees of texture, starting with food A and moving toward food B.	
	Offer a variety of shapes and colors in a non-pressured way. For example, allow them to choose the shapes of food using cookie cutters.	
	Encourage the child to serve themselves from shared bowls to control portion and food exposure.	
	Encourage your child to explore different foods through play and with their hands.	
	Consider if there is adequate ventilation in the environment or an alternative place to eat away from the smell of the kitchen or canteen.	
Child struggles to remain seated during mealtimes or becomes easily distracted	Make sure your child is seated appropriately. See 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Motor Skills Resource Pack' on our website: - Worksheet C-Sitting Posture - Worksheet-D Attention and Focus	

	Provide a calm, predictable routine. For example, laying the table together or using a lap pad, ankle weights, or weighted cutlery during the meal for calming input.	
	Minimise visual and auditory distractions around the room and at the table. For example, by turning the TV or radio off or keeping conversations quiet. In contrast having a focal point such as a tablet on the table may help focus the child towards the tasks.	
	Trial ear defenders or calming background noise if appropriate.	
	For further information see Worksheet Z-Sitting for Tabletop Tasks in the 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Sensory Resource Pack' on our website.	
Child appears uninterested in eating	Use engaging plates, utensils, or cutlery with fun designs.	
	Encourage movement breaks before meals.	
	Maintain the same routine each day, with mealtimes at the same time.	
Child overfills their mouth, may not recognise when it's full, or enjoys the sensation of their mouth being stretched	Avoid presenting all the food all at once by providing smaller portions.	
	Provide chew toys, chewing gum or similar activities to provide oral motor input before meals. This may support your child to gain sensory feedback and manage oral motor input.	
	Warm up your child's mouth through oral motor games such as blowing bubbles, whistles, vibrating toys, breathing or stretching.	
	Provide crunchy foods for those seeking oral input.	
Child gags easily	Speak to Speech and Language Therapist if concerned about the child's ability to swallow.	
	Consider whether specific textures or smells prompt gagging. Keep records of this to identify any patterns.	
	Set up a calming environment to eat meals to support your child to feel more at ease.	
Child shows extreme distress before or during mealtimes	Establish a predictable and calming routine leading up to meals and use visual schedules to set expectations.	
	Ensure your child is wearing clothes they feel comfortable in.	
	Offering calming activities before sitting at the table or during meals and offer an activity of their choice once mealtime has finished. See Using a now and next board in the 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Motor Skills Resource Pack' on our website.	
	Ensure the area for mealtimes is calm and free from distractions. For example, consider lighting, music, or	

	familiar objects that help your child to feel safe and secure.	
	Support your child by providing them with a choice such as a type of food they might like, utensils, or where they would like to sit. This may help them to feel more empowered during mealtimes.	
	Gradually support your child to mealtime scenarios in a low-pressure way. This could include sitting at the table without eating, touching the food, or even just being in the same room with the food to build comfort over time.	
Child finds it difficult to eat in public spaces or canteen	As above, offer calming activities prior to mealtimes.	
	Vinyl tablecloths can reduce cutlery and crockery sounds and felt pads on tables or chairs can reduce noise distractions in canteen.	
	Reduce noise distractions during the task by using ear defenders, playing music in headphones or calming background music.	
	If it is safe to do so, ensure your child is near an exit if/when they need to leave.	
Child struggles to eat with cutlery	Consider materials of cutlery e.g. metal or plastic.	
	Consider shaped or adaptive cutlery such as Kura Care Children's cutlery.	
	Place stickers or small washable pen mark on index finger and one on cutlery where finger should be placed to support position of grip.	
	Practice cutting with play dough. Make shapes and use a knife and fork to cut these into pieces.	
	Start cutlery practice on soft foods such as bananas.	
	Provide a non-slip mat or high edge plate.	
	For further information see: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Worksheet K-Mealtimes and Cutlery in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Pre-School Resource Pack' on our website. - Worksheet J-Cutlery Skills in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Motor Skills Resource Pack' on our website. 	

Useful resources:

[Sensory processing at home | Essex Partnership University NHS Trust](#)

[Keeping mealtimes positive - Resource Library - Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust](#)

[Does My Picky Eater Need Feeding Therapy Or Will They Grow Out of It?](#)