

Selective Eating in Children with ASD

Children with ASD sometimes have very specific food preferences. This can have an impact on their development, mental wellbeing and physical health. It can also cause significant practical and social difficulties for family and child.

How to assess whether or not the diet is adequate

We need 40 nutrients in our diet. For children over 2 years of age, the easiest way to assess whether or not we are likely to be getting these, is to compare a child's food choices with the **"Eatwell Plate"** (www.food.gov.uk/scotland/scotnut/eatwellplate/). Ideally, there should be some foods consumed regularly within each of the 4 essential "food groups". In addition, there are specific advantages to including oily fish, "wholegrain based" starchy foods, and green vegetables. These contain essential omega 3 fats, dietary fibre and magnesium (respectively), each of which benefit physical and mental wellbeing. Remember that most children in the UK have a diet that does not provide all the nutrients in the right amounts! This means that their diet can be adequate for survival, but still not the best for optimum health and mental wellbeing.

Understanding selective eating in children with Autism

Autistic children may be more likely to stick what they are most familiar with. This can be because they become obsessed with a particular food or routine. They may also avoid new foods because they find all new experiences difficult to cope with. They may also refuse some meals because they want something that they feel in control of. For a child that finds communication difficult, refusing to eat something can be a way of communicating stress or anxiety about something else. Also, many autistic children experience taste, smell or texture differently. This can be a further reason for finding some foods difficult to accept.

How to influence food choices

1. Having nutritious foods within sight, and making healthy choices yourself, is usually the best approach in the long term. This is usually more effective than persuasion, coaxing or any active encouragement. It is important to appear not to care what choices are made. This is sometimes easier said than done!
2. Some of the most preferred and least nutritious choices sometimes have to be unavailable to make it possible for new foods to be accepted.
3. Providing a choice between two different foods or meals can be helpful. It still allows a child to feel in control, even when neither choice is their favourite. Ensure that the choices are realistic though.
4. Try having a "Self service" meal. This is where everyone helps themselves to whatever they prefer from serving dishes placed in the middle of a table. This is less pressure than putting food on their plate.
5. Sometimes, telling a child what meal is coming next can help. For examples, including pictures of specific meals on a "visual timetable" can help.
6. Involve children in food preparation. The more a child is involved in choosing, preparing and cooking ingredients, the more they have invested in it and the more attached they become to the meal that is prepared. Don't actively encourage them to taste it though!
7. It is often best to get a selective eater to take a school meal rather than a packed lunch. The modelling of other pupils, different setting and limited menu often leads to "breakthroughs" with new foods that have been hard to achieve at home.
8. Some older autistic children can be motivated to make more nutritious choices simply through education about nutrition. This should always be done in a very "Matter of fact" way or it soon becomes nagging and persuasion!