

# Meal times can be a problem for children on the Autism Spectrum...

....and there are several reasons for this. In this leaflet there are a collection of strategies that can be incorporated into daily routine but also for other occasions, such as dining out or eating in an unfamiliar place.

## Health concerns

- Is your child constipated, not growing or putting on weight (see GP)
- Vitamin supplements in drinks and chews can help an unbalanced diet (see GP)
- Consistencies of food, adaptive chairs & cutlery and help with choking, chewing (contact your SaLT or OT)

The content within the above has no connection with the Autism Spectrum Team and as such they hold no legal obligation.



**Autism Spectrum Team**  
Sedgemoor Centre  
Priory Road  
St Austell  
PL25 5AB  
[www.cornwall.gov.uk](http://www.cornwall.gov.uk)

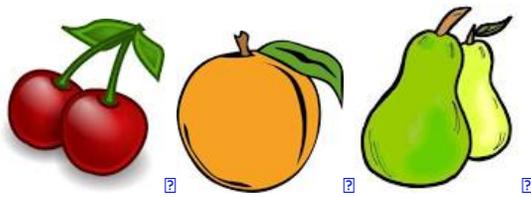
**Speech and Language Therapy Central Office**  
01208 256290  
**Occupational Therapy**  
(Children's Community Therapy)  
01872 254531

# Autism Spectrum Team



## Issues around food





## Typical Issues:

- My child will only eat a limited diet
- My child gags at mealtimes
- My child will only eat certain colour foods
- My child won't eat fruit or vegetables...
- My child smells their food all the time/inappropriately
- I wish my child would use their cutlery
- I wish my child could sit and eat with the rest of the family
- I cannot take my child to a café/fast food/restaurant
- My child will not try new foods
- Why does my child eat until they are sick
- My child only eats snacks and not at mealtimes

## Why?

### Sensory - Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder have Sensory Differences

- Oral sensory difference may lead your child to find some textures overwhelming. This is why they may only eat a limited range of foods, be reluctant to eat, will not try new foods and so on.
- Your child may find certain food colours disturbing, after certain experiences and similarly be drawn to certain colours or food types and textures – for example, choosing to only eat yellow foods.
- The temperature of the food may also present an issue. The child may only want food served hot or cold.
- It maybe that your child needs to explore or be with their foods before they eat or taste it. This maybe through touch, smell, licking and smearing.
- Your child may have a fear of food associated with toileting difficulties – for example, constipation.

### Social Environment -Remember ASC is social disorder and eating is a social activity

#### -Eating in a social setting

- \* Is very demanding in terms of un-written rules (behave & how to talk) along with sensory issues that are involved
- \* Settings like cafes, fast food outlets, restaurants, canteens, school dining areas are loud, busy, and unpredictable with no written rules and very few visual prompts.

#### -Eating at the family meal table

- \* Distractions can influence behaviour: a TV, a games console can be much more interesting than PEAS....!
- \* Does your child understand your family rules and routines?
- \* A fearful or bad experience can lead to many anxieties around meal times

### Motor Planning

Many children with Autism have...

- \* difficulties with motor co-ordination and planning which may make it difficult for your child to hold cutlery
- \* difficulties sitting for long periods and have difficulties with dining chairs.

## Strategies:

### SENSORY-

**Play food games:** using Jelly through a straw, chocolate spread finger painting, vegetable men, instruments, board games and painting..It's ok to be messy.

**2. New foods:** build in rewards, work slowly ( a pea at a time)limit your expectations; small successes should be celebrated

**3. A good role model:** ignore negative behaviour, no matter how bad it becomes, bring in small choice options, interactive tapas style meals, which encourage more interaction

**4. A food diary:** try a 2 week diary, observe reactions, allergies, patterns, colours and intolerances

**5. Cooking:** involving your child in food preparation.

**6. Similar foods:** try introducing similar foods – for e. g., if they like Strawberries, will they eat something else Strawberry flavoured?

### Social Environment

**-Scheduling / routines:** keeping the family mealtimes as predictable as possible, keep distractions low, celebrate achievements/rewards after the meal time.

**-Restaurants:** look on line for menu', create a visual menu with pictures to help your child understand the menu and interact. Help prepare your child, with small visits before, take photographs. Take some activities in your ba, as back up, set realistic goals and rules for a restaurant and home. It can be fun to play restaurants at home too!

**-Time:** what time are you going out, is it mealtime? A busy time? How long is your child expected to sit and wait for, how are you going to demonstrate this to them? .....A busy time is a noisy time.

### BE REALISTIC IN YOUR EXPECTATIONS

