

It is not unusual for people with Autism Spectrum Disorders to have some difficulties in the area of eating. Quite a number will be fussy eaters, who like the same thing day in/day out, and have a very limited diet. They may eat non-food items or refuse to eat unless certain strict rules are followed. This may involve the same seat at table or the same plate or cup. They may continuously and very determinedly raid the fridge or cupboard for their favourite foods. They may refuse to feed themselves with a spoon, preferring to finger feed or to be spoon fed by a parent. They may wander continuously, refusing to sit with the rest of the family at meal times. However, they may do none of these things, and in fact be just like your other children in their eating patterns.

Before looking at some specific problems that parents have asked about eating, let's look at what is 'normal'. Most toddlers are fussy eaters, and become very determined about what they will and will not eat. Variety is not necessary to sustain life (as many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders have proven), and perfectly healthy children can go for months on nothing but chicken and grapes, fruit juice and peanut paste sandwiches, or other limited combinations.

Toddlers are not as rigid as adults about eating, and tend to base their eating around hunger, not around set times of the day. Society has somehow determined that we will eat three meals a day, and in order to conform to convention children, including those with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, will need to learn that there are certain times to eat. In a study quoted in the book *Toddler Taming* (Green 1984), many parents of children without disabilities expressed concerns regarding their child's eating habits. Fifty percent of parents of 2 year olds were concerned that their child did not eat enough; and between fifty and sixty-five percent were concerned that their toddler did not eat the right type of foods. So don't become over concerned - we are yet to hear of a person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder actually starving himself to death. Most seem to be quite healthy, despite their diet.

What is the best way to introduce new foods?

- Introduce new food gradually. Present it without comment, threats or bribes.
- If your child doesn't eat it initially, remove his plate without comment, once you've given him enough time to eat it. Like most things with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, the more you fuss and carry on about what they don't do, the more likely they are to continue to resist. So delivering a 'lecture' to your child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder about "if you don't eat your carrots you won't be able to see properly and you won't grow up to be a big strong man like daddy", is a waste of time. Your child will probably not understand what you're saying, and if he does he probably won't care anyway. Plus all the attention he gets in this way will probably encourage him to keep spitting out his carrots.
- Use well liked foods to reward small tries of new foods. So if your child likes meat, try him with a small mouthful of a new food, first. If he puts it in his mouth immediately get a piece of meat ready on the spoon/fork, to put into his mouth.
- Don't over react if your child does begin to try a new food. As many of you will have found, as soon as you start to comment on, or praise, something positive your child is doing, he will stop. Wait till he has chewed and swallowed the new food, and then praise with "Good, Tom, eating your potato".

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- Limit snacking. If your child fills up on chips or biscuits all day, he will not necessarily be hungry at meal time. If he is hungry during the day make snacks small and as healthy as possible. These can include fruit, sultanas, cheese, juice.
 - Try to present food in different ways. For example your child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may not eat sandwiches cut into squares, but may eat triangles, or stars (cut out with a biscuit cutter). Try raw vegetables if your child rejects them cooked.
 - If your child is surviving by drinking lots of milk, but not eating much else, and is over two years of age, you will need to drastically cut down the milk intake if you are to have any chance of getting him to eat.

How do I stop my child from gagging?

First work out why your child is gagging. He may be rejecting lumps or any solid food because he is sensitive to touch around the mouth. It may be resistance to change from a purely liquid diet to the solids you are trying to introduce. It may be that he rejects certain textures but not others. It is interesting to see how many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders will gag on a tiny piece of soft potato, yet happily crunch their way through biscuits, crisps, and toast. We must also accept that everyone has preferences and most adults will be able to name some food that they would have great trouble chewing and swallowing without gagging. Everyone resists some foods for some reason. It could be the look, the smell, the taste, or the texture of the food. Allow your child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder his likes and dislikes.

- Introduce lumps gradually, mixed in small amounts with foods the child will already eat.
- Try different foods. Your child may gag on mashed potato but happily eat cooked or raw carrots, fresh or stewed apples.
- Try massaging the face area with firm slow strokes to cheeks, forehead, jaw and chin. When this is tolerated well you can start with the mouth. More detailed information regarding this type of program is available from Occupational Therapists and Speech Pathologists.

How do I encourage my child to eat in different situations?

It is typical for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders to have routines around eating. These can include always sitting in the same seat, eating only from a particular bowl, or refusing to eat anywhere else except at home, not even eating lunch at school. Often these patterns are created quite inadvertently. When first trying to teach your child to eat a variety of foods, or to sit to eat, most parents have found that it is best to stick to a routine, as this helps the children learn. It may not be until later when you want things to be a bit more flexible that you realise how entrenched the routine has become.

- Work out what is most important to you and your child. If your goal is for him just to eat, let him eat sitting where he wants, using whatever cups he wants. You can always work on these things later on.
- When your child is young, make sure you take a small snack of something he really likes when you go out, even if it is only for half an hour. This way he will get used to eating in a different place.
- Make a point of eating in different settings. Have lunch at the local playground or even on a rug in your own backyard like a picnic.
- Try to have a range of bowls that may appeal to your child, such as one with a Thomas the Tank Engine logo on it, and swap them around. If he keeps insisting on the same one, try to put something that he loves in the new one. This may be a few potato crisps or a few sultanas. Remember all children go through phases of insisting on the same things, so don't force the change - just keep trying and have different bowls and cups around.
- If your child insists on the same seat to eat, it is probably best to let him. It can be really stressful to have 'a fight' at each meal time for something that is not really very important.

You can try to make a game of it with the rest of the family with everyone changing seats every night, or perhaps have a special placemat for him that is set at different places around the table, to see if he will move. Perhaps it is the chair, not its position at the table, that is important - try shuffling the chairs around. Even though all the chairs may look exactly the same to us, they may not to your child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. If these things don't work, do not force the move.

- If your child will only eat at home, and not anywhere else try taking his favourite bowl or cup with you when you go to these places. Also have some of his favourite food with you. Don't force if he won't eat, and don't go overboard if he does. Verbal praise, such as 'good eating Paul', is sufficient. Most children are not away from home long enough for it to be a problem, and if they get hungry most will eat something they like. While a day at school without eating is not desirable, it is not dangerous.

My child eats on the run - How do I encourage him to sit and eat?

Although many parents are happy for their young child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder to eat wherever he is, as long as he eats, there comes a time when most parents would like their family, including their child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, to eat dinner together at the table. If your child can sit to eat, it also means that it will be a bit easier to take him out to eat in other settings, such as at MacDonald's.

- When first trying to teach your child to sit to eat, it is easier to do so in a one to one situation so that you can give more attention to teaching and rewarding a new behaviour. So, feed your child separately before the rest of the family eat.
- Look at how long your child can sit in other situations, for example while doing an activity or watching TV. If he can sit for 2 minutes, make your first goal for sitting at the table less than this, perhaps 60 seconds or 90 seconds to ensure success.
- Start with food you know your child really likes. Remember, one goal at a time - this is not the time to also try to give him 'new foods'. Bring your child to the table, showing him what you are about to eat if this will help him understand what is happening. Sit him on a chair, and sit next to him on another one. Use cues "sit William", show him the COMPIC picture for 'sit', and model the behaviour by sitting down yourself. Immediately give him some favourite food and praise the sitting with "good sitting William". If he tries to get up with the food, take it away and put him gently back in the chair. If he keeps getting up instantly, remove the food, let him move away from the table, and try again later.
- If your child sits, don't become over ambitious. Stick to the goal you had originally set (1 minute), and let the child get up at this time. Once he is able to sit consistently for one minute you can gradually increase the time. Have only enough food that he can eat in that one minute, say "finished", then let your child get up. That way you are deciding what your child should do, rather than him always "calling the shots". It is important for all children, including children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, to learn that we can't always do what we want, and certain rules need to be followed. They will need these skills at kindergarten and school.
- Have lots of 'sitting' practice throughout the day, not just at regular meal times. The more often you have short bursts of sitting and eating, the more quickly the child is likely to learn what is required.
- It is probably easiest to have your child become used to eating at the main dining table where the rest of the family eat, right from the beginning. Because of their resistance to changes, it may be difficult for them to move from a small table and chair or beanbag to the main table.
- If you are having trouble keeping your child at the table, it may be useful to change the environment. You may be able to put your table in such a position that your child is boxed in between the wall and the table, with yourself next to him to make escape more difficult.

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- If you feel that your child understands what is required, and still refuses to sit at the table, you may need to use tougher measures. Place your child's meal on the table, with that of the rest of the family. If he gets up, remove the food and put it somewhere he can't get at it. If he returns to the table give him one more chance. If he gets up again say "finished", and remove his plate permanently. Empty food into the bin if necessary. Do not chase him, or try to jolly him into coming back to the table, it will just become a game - funny to the child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder but not to you and the rest of the family. When each of the other members of the family have finished their meal, get them to say "finished" and put their plate in the kitchen. This will help the child learn what happens.
 - Many children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder will not accept the above happily. Most likely they will try a variety of things to get back their dinner, including a temper tantrum. Try not to give in, or give attention to what they may do. Make sure that what you served in the first place is something your child likes and will want to eat, otherwise he will be quite happy to get up and miss his meal.
 - Use your other children or your partner as a model. Praise them for sitting, give very small rewards. Again it will give your child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder an extra clue as to what you want, and what he needs to do to also get praise and rewards.

My child will eat as long as I feed him. How do I get him to feed himself?

At the age of about 15 months, most toddlers are keen to hold the spoon and feed themselves, though often are not able to get the food neatly from bowl to mouth. At this age most can hold a sipper cup for drinks. At about the age of three years many children can use a knife to cut soft foods, and like to try to butter their own bread. By four and a half years they are starting to use a knife and fork. Of course there will be great variety in the ages children do these things, and considering the developmental delay of children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, they will generally achieve these skills later than those listed above. Often the motivation of children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder will be much less than that of other children, and they may not be interested in feeding themselves if someone else is willing to do it for them.

- Don't be concerned about mess, encourage all your child's effort to feed himself. A hard plastic bib with catch tray, as well as a bowl with suction cup that doesn't 'travel' around the table may be useful. A plastic sheet on the floor underneath where your child sits will also make cleaning up easier. Remember, all children make a mess when they are learning to use a spoon.
- Even when your child is young and you are still feeding him, give him a spoon to hold, play with, and praise any efforts to use the spoon.
- Feeding yourself is a skill which can be taught using faded prompts. This means giving the child lots of help initially, then gradually giving less help until he is doing it independently. The steps would be as follows:
 1. Put the spoon in your child's hand and put your hand over his. In this way help him to scoop up the food and put it in his mouth.
 2. As above, but hold your child's hand more loosely.
 3. As above, but pause after helping your child have a few mouthfuls, to see if he will move his hands towards the food of his own accord.
 4. Put the spoon in your child's hand and hold his wrist. Guide his hand to scoop up the food and put it in his mouth.
 5. As above but hold the child's arm near the elbow.
 6. Put the spoon in your child's hand and give it a small push towards the food. Allow him to scoop and eat. If necessary re-position the spoon in your child's hand between mouthfuls as it can be terribly frustrating if it has turned around and he can't scoop anything.
 7. Put the spoon on the table and guide his hand to pick it up. Let him eat by himself.
 8. Put spoon and bowl on table and cue him to 'eat'.

Note: At each step it is important to praise your child. So even in Step 1, where the adult is doing most of the work, the child does not necessarily know this, so praise him, with "good boy, Josh - holding spoon/eating". Stay at each step until the child is accepting it easily or has mastered it.

- Your child will be more motivated to feed himself if it is ice cream rather than brussel sprouts (well, generally anyway). So make sure when you are beginning to teach this skill to make the food something your child will be keen to eat.
- The reason your child will not hold the spoon may be a sensory problem. Try massaging his arms and hands as this will help reduce sensitivity to touch. Firm massage is usually tolerated better than light touch. Use a slow rhythmic action for about 5 minutes.
- It may be the feel of the spoon is particularly unpleasant to your child. Spoons with different types of handles and thicknesses are widely available (chemist shops, variety stores). Try a few different ones to see if this is the problem. Make your own by wrapping tape or bandage about the handles of your spoons.

My son eats independently but it takes him 'forever' - How can I hurry him up?

- Firstly decide what is a reasonable length of time for someone to eat a meal, for example half an hour.
- Time how long it currently takes him.
- Introduce a timer, or use the one on your stove. Initially set it so that it goes off about the time he would be finishing anyway. When the bell rings say "dinner finished", and take the plate away.
- It is probably good to give a warning five minutes before the alarm is due to go off, that is, you could set the alarm for 55 minutes, say "5 minutes left", and reset the clock for 5 minutes. Follow the "dinner finished" routine when it rings again. Even though your child may not have a concept of time or what 5 minutes means, he will learn what the alarm means.
- When he understands what is happening, and is consistently eating his meal before the final bell, gradually reduce the time, by only a minute or two at a time, until your goal of half an hour is reached.
- Throughout the meal give encouragement to "keep eating", and praise when he has finished within time.

How do I stop my son continually raiding the fridge and cupboard?

- Look at why he is raiding in the first place. Most likely it will be to get favourite foods such as biscuits/chips. The simplest solution is - don't have these foods in your house, at least for the time being. It may even help to improve your child's diet, as well as that of the rest of the family. You can always bring these foods back into the house at some later date. The child is less likely to get upset about something that is clearly not there, rather than if he can see his favourite chocolate bar in the cupboard but not be able to get at it.
- If you can't bear to be without these foods in your house, keep them in a cupboard that you can lock, or that is out of reach of your child. Be prepared for tantrums, or some response, once the child works out his favourite food is there, but out of reach. We all know how persistent children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder can be. If you give in once, they learn that if they persist long enough you will eventually give in, and they will get what they want.
- Locks for both the fridge and your cupboards are available. Simpler options are string or elastic tying two door handles together.

What do you do about the child who puts lots of things that are not edible in his mouth?

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- Remember that mouthing is a normal developmental stage that most children go through at a young age. Your child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may do this later than other children, so don't panic. Just accept it as a normal developmental stage that will pass.
 - Some children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder eat grass and other plants. Make sure there are no dangerous plants in your garden. Any nursery or the Department of Agriculture should be able to advise you if you have any doubts. Offer substitutes if you see your child eating plants, for example a piece of fruit (but not chips, chocolate). Generally eating garden plants does not appear to have any ill effects on a child, though it does not do much for the garden.
 - Try ignoring the behaviour. It may be that your over-the-top reaction to a child mouthing his sleeves is enough to keep him doing it, just to check how you'll react.
 - If your child is chewing collars and cuffs of clothing to the point where clothes are becoming very frayed, or are constantly soggy, you can try painting the collar or cuffs with a solution that is used to stop people biting their fingernails (available from chemists). It tastes very bitter, and may be enough to remind the child of what he is doing. Chewing may have become a habit he is not even aware of, very much like some people who chew their nails.
 - Try to avoid the situation and break the habit. For example put your child in shirts or jumpers that do not have a collar.
 - The chewing may come and go, and be a sign that something is not right. It could be a result of stress, which is a problem for most children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, so look at what may be causing the situation and try to change that. The chewing may just mean that your child is getting more teeth.